Preserve Us

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Preserve Us

by Ryumako

Summary

Everyone is preparing to leave Honnou Town after the defeat of Ragyo. It's just a few weeks before the island is to be destroyed, and Ryuko and Mako decide to go on a second date by themselves to the beach. In a twist of fate, things don't go as planned.

s/o to user JaceCadet, who is my editor.

Chapter 1: Prologue

It was the first real day of summer, the first full day the girls had out of school for their long-awaited break. Not that the school year had been particularly difficult in an academic sense, what with the constant battles erupting and –what was it again? The threat of end of the world? Good thing that was taken care of. Yes, it was the day after the graduation ceremony, and the entire town had only a couple weeks before the island was to be abandoned.

Ryuko and Mako had mutually decided to celebrate, to break in the season, and what better way to do that than to head to the beach? Wanting it to be more of a date-type outing, it was just the two of them on their little expedition to the sandy shore.

They had taken Ryuko's very own scooter, issued to her by Satsuki herself as something of a gift. It was a little inconvenient what with their duffle bag of beach items, but they figured they could manage; it's not like Mako wasn't used to carrying bags even larger just on her back. This was something she'd done before, riding with her while shouldering significant weight. Ryuko didn't have a reason to worry about their safety or the logistics of it.

The sun beat down relentlessly, making Ryuko grateful she brought along her shades. It was a cloudless day, and thankfully there weren't many other cars on the road. It was kind of odd considering it was only midday, but she figured it was just because everyone was still so busy preparing to move elsewhere after the demolition. Hopefully, this would also mean the beach would be less crowded.

She kept her eyes fixed on the road, focused on their destination. Mako's arms wrapped tightly around her waist like an affectionate seatbelt. She felt the girl's cheek against her bare shoulder blade, her soft hair tickling the nape of her neck as the wind billowed around them. It made her feel oddly glad that she wore a tank top that day.

The brunette was quiet, but that wasn't unlike her on rides like these. It's not like Ryuko could've heard anything too well anyway, with the wind whipping around them. The verbal silence was actually welcomed; it gave her an excellent opportunity to reflect on her own thoughts, something she was often preoccupied doing nowadays. Not that her female companion's words were unwanted, she'd just prefer to enjoy the feeling of her arms around her waist for now. While glancing at one of the review mirrors, Ryuko notices that her beautiful counterpart has dozed off and smiles. At that moment, there was a content and comfortable silence.

The older teen slowed to an idle stop at the red light ahead of them. She'd notice the other girl's grip loosen slightly, but thought nothing of it. At the sudden stillness, the halting of the warm winds, it was suddenly very quiet. She felt Mako stir slightly, and wondered if she had been startled out of her sleep. She also wondered why she didn't say anything then, if just a virtually insignificant observation of the surrounding environment, but still she remained silent. Still, she decided to think nothing of it. Maybe she hadn't woken up after all, but she didn't bother to check.

The light changed to green, and Ryuko accelerated. Having a good amount of experience with her scooter, she trusted herself as a decent driver so obviously, she'd accelerate gradually. She'd typically speed up with caution, especially if she weren't the only one on the vehicle. Especially if her life wasn't the only one she was accountable for. In standard circumstances, everyday situations like this one could've, and should've been, she wouldn't have pressed the gas pedal too suddenly, too roughly.

She wouldn't have basically *floored it*, a mistake produced by her over-occupied thoughts, her distracted conscious. Ironically, her thoughts had been of Mako in that split second of devastating error.

She could've recounted the occurrence in slow-motion, if she hadn't been facing forward. What she *could* recall in perfect and excruciating clarity was the feeling of Mako's arms sliding away from her waist, the terror-inducing sensation of the scooter suddenly being an entire person (and duffle bag) lighter than it had been a split second ago.

For a moment, Ryuko didn't know how to react. She impulsively pulled the scooter over on the side of the road, completely ignoring the kickstand. Once off the vehicle, she turned around to run in the previous direction. The second she did, her heart panicked more than it had just a few seconds ago at the distant sight of her girlfriend, motionless on the pavement. She sprinted, her legs carrying her quicker than ever, not even feeling the asphalt beneath her.

She reached her hastily and knelt down beside her, scooping her body off the large duffle bag and into her arms. "Mako, say something!" She shook her rather vigorously.

She hadn't realized she'd been crying until she watched one of her own tears splatter onto the brunette's cheek. "Mako!"

Chapter 2: Not Just Any Visitor

Everything seemed so far away. There were standard hospital noises going on around her: machines whirring, papers shuffling, people bustling around, but her brain didn't acknowledge any of it. She kept her head in her hands, elbows on her knees, staring down at her legs with unfocused vision. She had stopped crying, but she felt like it could start again at any given moment. Her brain had yet to fully catch up with what had actually happened. Slowly, she breathed in, and then shuddered as her breath escaped a second later.

Ryuko's mind kept rewinding what had happened, over and over again as if to understand it. It was a series of rapid mental snapshots; happy and free on the road, carelessly stopping at the light, the feeling of nothingness behind her. Her body on the road. A picturesque drive, a sudden jerking motion, abrupt weightlessness. Her limp, unresponsive body, lying on the street atop a squished duffle bag.

How long had it been since she dialed the ambulance? How long had she been sitting there in that waiting room? It couldn't have been more than an hour, but to her it felt like it had been the entire day at least. When she was there, kneeling in the street, trying in vain to resuscitate her girlfriend somehow as her bare knees dug into the asphalt, she thought about calling the girl's father. The thought occurred to her, considering the man was a doctor, but something told her it would probably be a better idea to call a certified medical ambulance.

She had been numb when the vehicle arrived promptly on the scene, when they lifted her unconscious body onto the stretcher, and when they invited her to ride in the ambulance along with them to the hospital. She had been numb when she recited the Mankanshoku family's phone number to the professionals, and she had been numb when she heard their panicked voices on the other line.

Now all she could do was wait. The family had arrived at the hospital only seconds after the ambulance had. They wheeled the girl off, her family in tow, and they hadn't allowed her to follow past the big double doors. Not yet, the doctors had told her. Just immediate family for now. Not yet.

It wasn't supposed to be this way…not today. She and Mako should have been on the beach right now, laughing and splashing in the water. She was supposed to be admiring the way the sun kissed her skin, the way she filled out her bathing suit. Instead, she was sitting in a dismal low-grade hospital, all by herself, undeniably in shock. Unfortunately, Honnou Town didn't have any exceptional hospitals, even despite the constant injuries that occurred throughout the years. Most establishments in town were all but in shambles. As if regular hospitals weren't depressing enough.

Just as she was sure she was about to start crying again, the double doors opened once more, causing her to jerk her head upward. Mako's family began approaching her, their expressions unreadable, which was incredibly unsettling. Sukuyo sat down next to her, and Barazo and Mataro sat across from her.

“They wouldn’t let Guts into the hospital,” Mataro spoke first. It was such an irrelevant thing to say that Ryuko didn’t even register it at first. Impulsively, she kicked his ankle.

Sukuyo gave him a look, and then turned to face Ryuko, placing a sympathetic hand onto her shoulder. “She’s gonna be alright, Ryuko,” She said. “I’m sure it’s not your fault.”

“What did the doctor say?” She asked, her voice coming out hoarser than she expected. She disregarded the second thing she told her.

“Doc said she probably has some mild brain trauma,” Barazo interjected, putting on his professional voice. “She’s asleep right now, but it ain’t gonna be a coma or anything severe like that. She’ll just be unconscious for a little while as her brain recovers and mends itself. I tried to tell the doc that we could take her home and care for her ourselves ya know, but he refused. Didn’t like the look of my degree.”

Ryuko just blinked at him. Then, Sukuyo spoke again, “Anyway, I told the nice doctor she had a visitor waiting, and he said it was alright to send you on back. If you’re ready, hun.”

“Yeah, I’d like…” She swallowed. “I’d like to see her.”

She rose from her chair, not feeling her legs support her but still maintaining her balance. Sukuyo got up with her, keeping her hand placed on her shoulder. She spoke softly, “I can lead you to her room so you don’t get lost.” Ryuko managed to smile at her empathetically to acknowledge her offer.

Her legs carried her through the halls, her mind on autopilot. Sukuyo had opened the doors for her, and then proceeded to grasp her hand as she led her. She didn’t really acknowledge it, besides the fact that it was somehow reassuring; it gave her more of a literal grip on the situation, the path unfolding before her. The white, dingy walls of the hallway were never ending and became more and more oppressive to her senses by the second. Just as she was starting to feel suffocated, the girl’s mother stopped promptly in front of one of the doors.

“This is it,” The woman faced her, regarding her gently.

“Thanks,” She responded. She faced the door, took a breath, and then pushed it open.

Sukuyo shut the door behind her. Ryuko stepped bit by bit into the room, her mind dazed. Her vision immediately locked onto Mako, and her heart sunk. She had never seen her look so… lifeless. Everything felt so static, so surreal. Even when Mako slept normally she had character, whether it was her snoring or the mumbling that came as a product of her dreams. But this…this wasn’t Mako. This was Mako’s body, limp and listless, the only noticeable life being the subtle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

She dragged one foot in front of the other, approaching her bedside slowly. Part of her wanted to fall for her knees and beg to wake up from this nightmare, but she didn’t.

It was a tad morbid to think, but Ryuko couldn’t help but acknowledge the girl’s beauty. Even now, her heart leapt at the sight of her face, scrapes and all. She swallowed, noticing a lump in her throat.

She wished Mako was awake. Ryuko wanted nothing more at that moment than for her to wake up just so she could tell her how sorry she was. If only she could tell her how much she truly cherished her, and how much she needed her to be okay. Just for Mako to feel the sensation of her thumb's soft pad as Ryuko gingerly stroked her cheek would be enough. She overcame all of her tough times with the aid of Mako, and now that she was the subject of tragedy, she felt utterly lost for the first time in a long time.

Regardless of this, just seeing Mako relieved her nerves a bit. She began to think more clearly, the feeling returning to her limbs. She pulled up a nearby chair to the girl's bedside, and then gently lifted her limp hand and placed it within her own.

Unfortunately, as the immediate fog of disaster started to dissipate from her mind, certain things were becoming a lot more apparent to her. This was all *her fault*.

Ryuko was responsible for the major injury of her own girlfriend.

If she would've just driven a little more cautiously…how could she have been so *careless*?! Sure, she drove a tad recklessly when she was on her own, but this was unforgivable. She put someone else's life in danger, and the punishment of this risky behavior had fallen onto her passenger's unsuspecting shoulders. And her passenger was not just anyone…

Why didn't they own helmets? Someone should've known better. *She* should've known better. She should've gone out and bought a pair of helmets. They could've prevented all of this. She could've been okay. They could've brushed it off, been a little startled by the mishap, but ultimately made it to the beach unscathed.

She shook her head, and felt a single large tear drop down her cheek and onto her knee. Subconsciously, she gripped her hand a little tighter. How long would Mako be like this? How long was a 'little while'? She absolutely could not leave her side, lest the brunette were to wake up and not have her there.

Just as the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor was starting to put her in another trance, a doctor entered the room. He had been staring at his clipboard, but upon spotting Ryuko he said, "Oh, hello there. You must be Ryuko, the patient's err, significant other, yes? Her family informed me about you."

"Yeah that's…that's me."

"Well, the good news is Mako here should be fine. The scans show some brain trauma, and we're not entirely sure what the result of that could be. We won't know the extent of the trauma until she wakes up." He paused, as if expecting a response. Ryuko remained silent, just staring at the girl. "Nevertheless, we expect her to make a full recovery."

"Really?" She looked up to him, hope in her eyes.

"Oh, absolutely," He assured. "It was a bad accident no doubt, but the bag she landed on broke most of her fall. If she hadn't landed on top of it, well…apparently, it could've been much worse. Could've been fatal."

“F-fatal?” She choked. This was all so unreal. Before this accident, this one in particular, Mako seemed virtually indestructible… after all they’d been through before.

“Could’ve been,” He repeated, clearing his throat awkwardly. “Anyway, we’re not sure when she’ll wake up. Could be a day from now, could be just a few hours, depending. But she definitely needs her rest.” Again, a pause. His voice adopted a tone of sympathy, “That being said…we feel it’s about time for visitors to leave. I’m sorry.”

What? She had only just gotten here. “I’m not just any visitor…” She said under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’m not just any visitor. I’m her girlfriend. I need to be here for her when she wakes up. I *have* to be.”

“But the hospital has a policy…”

“To hell with your policy. I’m not leaving,” She insisted, her voice low and her eyes tearing up again against her favor. “You’d have to carry me out, and I guarantee it wouldn’t be easy. For your own sake, I wouldn’t even try.”

The man seemed incredibly off-put, and frankly at a loss. He sputtered for a moment, and then conceded. “Fine. But you absolutely cannot make noise. And don’t mess with any of the equipment.” Suddenly, the kindness was gone from his voice, but Ryuko didn’t care. “Bathroom is right down the hall. If anyone sees you and asks about you, say you’re a relative.”

“Sure, whatever,” She responded, wishing he’d leave at this point. Instead, he quickly checked Mako’s vitals, and then left the room. Silence fell over the room once more, save for the continuous beeping of the heart monitor. Somehow, it became more reassuring than anything; it meant she was alive. She took a deep breath, stroked the girl’s thumb, and then whispered, “Wake up soon…please…”

Beep, beep, beep, beep...

An unknown amount of time later, Ryuko found herself jolt up in her chair suddenly. Had she dozed off? She looked toward the wall clock nearby and realized she had: it had been about two hours. She vaguely acknowledged a slight ache in her spine, and then turned back to look to Mako. She was incredibly startled to find the girl’s eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

“Mako?” She spoke, excitement evident in her tone. She was happy, yet very concerned. “Mako! Are you-”

The brunette sat up suddenly, causing Ryuko’s hand to fall out of hers. The girl looked to the hand that she had been holding, and then to her face. She stared at her blankly, no distinguishable emotion on her face. It was the definition of unsettling.

“How are you feeling?” She asked with the utmost concern, visibly disturbed by her unresponsiveness.

Still, she just continued to stare at her. Ryuko noticed then just a hint of confusion in her eyes. After a few more unbearable seconds of silence, Mako tilted her head at her and finally spoke.

“Who are you?”

Chapter 3: Good Vibes

Ryuko had spent a rather sleepless night on the small couch in Mako's room. She had been admittedly exhausted, but she just couldn't sleep after the realization of the true nature of Mako's condition. Mako's mother had called Ryuko's cell around midnight, not asking if she planned to stay overnight but instead outright confirming it. At the time, Ryuko didn't have the heart to talk about her discovery, regardless of how much her family deserved to know.

Ryuko was heartbroken. Completely and utterly heartbroken. Her chest was tight; so tight that it throbbed audibly in her own eardrums. The pain she felt now was only matched by the anguish she experienced from Senketsu's death. And that wasn't even too long ago…she wasn't sure how much more strife she could handle before she would be the one in the hospital instead. But she had to stay strong; if not for herself, then for Mako.

Last night, when Mako sat up and asked who she was, Ryuko was equally as confused at first. She thought it had to be a prank –that sort of thing wasn't too far off for Mako's sense of humor. But it wasn't. It became explicitly clear that Mako wasn't teasing when she remained genuinely confused by Ryuko's presence. Ryuko understood then what that meant and just didn't know how to respond to it. The brunette asked her a few other drowsy questions, such as 'what's going on' and 'where am I', but she didn't answer those, either. She didn't explain who she was right then, because frankly she didn't have the energy to. Instead, she convinced the girl to lie back down and fall back asleep.

The girl slept through the night. Ryuko had spent a lot of the late hours just watching her, during the time she wasn't desperately trying to get her own rest. By the time dawn broke, she felt grateful. She wasn't necessarily looking forward to seeing Mako's doctor again, but she really needed to. Not only did she need to tell him what happened, but he needed to make an official diagnosis. She also needed him to tell the Mankanshoku's the news, because she just couldn't.

At about 8 AM, the doctor finally stepped into the room. He looked at Ryuko shortly, and then tended to Mako. "Sleep well?"

"No," The dark-haired girl answered him. She wondered why he even asked; she must've looked terrible. She hadn't showered since the previous day's morning, her hair was all disheveled, and she was still wearing her beach clothes from yesterday. However, on her one overnight trip to the bathroom, she did take the liberty of washing off the streaked mascara that was on her cheeks.

The man sighed. "Anything new with Mako here? Did she wake up at any point?"

His voice suddenly sounded further away, but still she responded, "Yeah."

He looked over to her, startled by her confirmation. She continued, "Yeah, she did. She sat up, looked at me, and then…and then she asked who I was." She met his stare, her blue eyes stricken with grief. "I told her to go back to sleep, and she didn't wake up again after that. So,

yeah, she has memory loss. *Significant* memory loss. Unless I'm wrong, and you have better news for me."

"*Really* now?" He sound surprised, which she supposed was to be expected. Still, she didn't like it. "Well, her family's on the way over now. Until they get here, I'll be tending to some other patients. When they arrive, I'll wake up Ms. Mankanshoku and we can see exactly what we're dealing with. If what you say is true, we'll have to run several more tests."

All of his words were registering in Ryuko's head on a delay. All she really comprehended was that she was going to do even more waiting on her own. She hoped the girl's family was going to be as quick as they usually were.

It ended up being another grueling thirty minutes before the Mankanshoku ensemble arrived, entering the room behind the doctor. They all stood around Mako's bed instead of taking a seat, staring at Mako with nervous and concerned expressions. Ryuko remained on the couch, silent, hiding behind her bangs. She drew her knees to her chest and braced herself for the doctor's formal evaluation.

"I've been told Miss Mako here has already woken up once on her own, but was coaxed back to sleep," The doctor started. "I will now attempt to carefully wake her up now to evaluate her mental situation. That being said, if she is to wake up, I'll need the family to remain quiet."

Everyone held their breath as the doctor roused Mako from her state of unconsciousness. Ryuko still didn't look up, even when the doctor spoke Mako's name as the girl blinked awake slowly. One could feel the relief sweep the room as the brunette appeared fully conscious.

"I'm in the hospital?! Whoa!" Her eyes widened as she sat up abruptly. "And mom and dad are here!"

"Sis!" Mataro shouted, leaning over the bed's railing in an attempt to hug her. He drew away when the doctor gave him a stern look.

"It's true, Mako, you're in the hospital." The doctor regarded her. "Unfortunately, you've suffered a pretty severe accident. I'm here now to ask you a few questions, alright? Answer to the best of your ability."

Mako nodded quickly, and he continued. "First of all, how are you feeling?"

"A little dizzy…confused…but I always feel like that!" She thought aloud. "The back of my head is really achey, now that you mention it!" She put a hand to the back of her skull as if to emphasize. "Actually…more like my whole head. Pretty darn achey." She settled her hands in her lap. "Is that why I'm here?"

"Right you are," He commented simply, writing something on his clipboard. "That feeling's to be expected. Next question: Do you remember anything about the past twenty-four hours?"

The girl stared up at him blankly, and he could see the gears turning in her brain. Suddenly, she threw her head into her hands and whined. “It really hurts…and everything is too fuzzy…”

“Alright, you can stop trying to remember.” He scribbled swiftly. “Do you feel you’re in need of painkillers?”

“Yes please!” Mako answered immediately. Her family was on edge, biting their nails nervously. Ryuko had since covered her ears with her palms; as concerned as she was, she couldn’t bear to hear her hurt more.

“I’ll get the nurse on it in a bit. But first, try to answer me just a few more questions –you’re doing great.” He paused. “It might sound odd, but do you remember the any of the people in this room?” The doctor had noticed she seemed to recognize her parents, but he needed to be positive.

“Well, I don’t recognize you, Mr. Doctor!” She started, and he chuckled. “But of course I do! Mom, dad, and my little brother, Mataro.” She had been smiling, but then her expression turned into panic. “Am I supposed to forget them?!”

“No, no! It’s *very* good that you remember them.” The room fell momentarily silent before he continued, “But uh, do you remember that girl over there, sitting on the couch?”

Mataro stepped aside so Mako would have a more clear view of Ryuko. The dark-haired girl had since removed her hands from her ears and was staring straight at the brunette, having heard the doctor’s question to her. She stared back at her, her expression one of deep thought, before she finally answered, “Yeah, I think so!”

“Really?” The doctor asked with mild surprise. Ryuko rose from her seat, eyes wide, stepping next to the girl’s family. Had Mako actually remembered her after all?

“Yeah, she’s the girl from when I woke up earlier!” She turned to the doctor again. “Does she work here? At the hospital?”

Ryuko stumbled backwards as though her words had physically pushed her back. She put her hands on the wall behind her, trying to get a grip. No one even bothered to answer the girl; it was dead quiet. Even Mako could feel the tension arise…her pleasant smile had gradually began to fade.

“Oh dear,” The doc spoke under his breath as he took another note. “Well, that makes sense, I suppose.” He sighed, and then turned to the room’s guests. “From what it looks like, Mako may have *retrograde amnesia*.”

The doctor intended to continue, but was interrupted by Barazo. “Now hold on a sec, I’m a doctor too! If my daughter has amnesia, how come she can remember us but not Ryuko over there?” He crossed his arms obstinately.

“Well, if you were a *skilled* doctor, you’d know that retrograde amnesia affects memories only a certain amount of time back –months, years, depending- not the victim’s entire life,”

He said, matter-of-factly. “There are two forms of amnesia: one that affects the ability to make new memories post-incident, and one that causes already-formed memories to escape the patient’s mind. This appears to be the latter, as she clearly can form new memories.” He took a breath. “The good news is she remembers her family, which means her error in memory only goes back to a hopefully recent and certain point.”

“Oh, I knew that!” Barazo insisted.

“Sure you did, honey.” Sukuyo patted his shoulder. Meanwhile, Mataro kept Mako distracted by blubbering on her shoulder about how glad he was that his sister was okay.

“Is it possible for her to get it back?” Ryuko’s voice caught the room off-guard. Mako’s parents stepped aside so the doctor could see her. “Her memory? Is it possible to recover it?”

He rubbed his chin. “Each patient is different, but it does happen. In the event that her lost memory is triggered by an event or happenstance, it is possible for her memory recovered.” That was all Ryuko needed: hope.

“In any case, she’ll be fine. Besides the evident memory loss, she shouldn’t sustain any major physical injuries,” He reassured.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Sukuyo said sweetly. “And oh, Ryuko hun,” She began, turning to the teen. “I brought you a change of clothes, a brush, and some soap. I figured you could use one of the hospital showers to freshen up.” She held out a bag to her, and Ryuko muttered a ‘thank you’.

Sukuyo then returned to her husband’s side, speaking up at him, “How about we get out of the doctor’s hair for a while? Besides, it’s a little crowded in here…and something tells me Ryuko needs some time with Mako here.”

“Good idea! I’m starved, anyway.” The man began walking toward the door before anyone could object. Sukuyo followed him, literally dragging a sobbing Mataro out of the room behind her.

Once the door shut behind them, the doctor looked to Ryuko again. “I’ll give you a few minutes. I’ve some other patients to check on, and I’m going to get a nurse on those painkillers.” She only nodded, and stood still as he too exited the room.

As soon as he left, she tossed the bag onto the couch and pulled up the same chair from the previous night. She returned to her side, and then sat down next to her. Soon enough, an awkward silence fell between them. She was transfixed on Mako, trying to think of what to say first. The brunette twiddled her thumbs, obviously not too upset at the prospect of her own memory loss.

Ryuko sighed. “You really don’t remember me?” She hadn’t intended to sound so hurt, but she couldn’t help it. Mako only shook her head at her, sympathy in her expression.

There was another silence after Ryuko shuddered a sigh. “I’m sorry, but…” Mako spoke kindly. “I didn’t quite catch your name…”

“It’s Ryuko. Ryuko, ah, Matoi,” She told her, feeling both odd and sad having to tell her that. At that moment, she felt like spilling it all to her: who exactly she was in her life and all they’d been through together. However, she really didn’t want to overwhelm her (and she wasn’t sure she had the energy to).

Despite this, she couldn’t help but ask. “What *do* you remember?”

“It kind of hurts to think, but…if I really try hard, my last memory was just a boring old day at school,” She told her, some uncertainty in her tone. “I sleep through a lot of my classes, so I don’t remember anything noteworthy about it!”

Ryuko swallowed. “Okay…” She said, and then went deep into thought. Mako didn’t mention anything about the revolt…nothing about Ragyo, the uprising…then, her next question became clear to her. “What does the name *Satsuki Kiryuin* mean to you?”

“Satsuki-sama?! Why, she’s student council president!” She spoke with enthusiasm. “She’s the queen bee of Honnouji Academy! She rules us all with an iron fist.” She held up a fist emphatically, and then faced Ryuko again. “How do you know Satsuki-sama?” She gasped dramatically, “Do you go to Honnouji, too? I haven’t seen you around! It would be real neat if-”

“Mako,” She interrupted her, and the girl instantly fell silent. In spite of how disappointed Ryuko was at her answer, she couldn’t help but feel somewhat comforted by her enthusiasm; it showed she retained her character. She briefly considered how to answer the girl’s question, and then opted for honesty. She figured she could fill in Mako’s memory gaps as they went along, and this was the perfect opportunity.

“The truth is, as it turns out, Satsuki’s my long-lost sister.”

“Whaaat?!” Mako exclaimed, her palms on her cheeks. “Satsuki has a *sister?* I mean, I guess I see the resemblance, now that you mention it!” She clapped excitedly. “That’s amazing! But wait, I thought you said your last name was ‘Matoi’, not Kiryuin…” She became skeptical.

“Well…that part’s kind of a long story. But I am, most certainly, Satsuki’s sister.” Admittedly, she still wasn’t quite used to it herself –it felt weird coming out of her own mouth.

“I suppose I’ll have to take your word for it!” She gasped again, “But that means…you’re like royalty! I’ll have to call you Ryuko-sama.”

At this, Ryuko frowned. She didn’t really know what to tell her…in the past, she had grown accustomed to the ‘-chan’ honorific. She disregarded it when she first used it in regards to her, but now it had definitely grown on her. And now Mako was going to hold her at such high-esteem…she really needed to fill her in, but it just wasn’t the right time. She felt very disgruntled at the world.

Ryuko didn’t know how long she was sitting there, silently cursing the universe in her mind, but then Mako spoke up again. “Ryuko-sama? Can I tell you something?”

“What is it?” She returned, interested in her sincere tone, despite the out-of-place honorific.

“I keep getting confused looking at you, because even though I don’t really um…know who you are, I just…” She looked to her lap nervously, and Ryuko was on the edge of her seat. “When I look at you, it makes my brain happy…even if my brain also hurts. I don’t know what it means? But my heart says you’re good vibes.”

Ryuko couldn’t help but grin brilliantly at her, and apparently her smile was contagious. Before she could respond to her, the nurse stepped into the room, causing both girls to turn their heads.

“Hello girls,” The woman interrupted politely. She then prepped Mako to administer her painkillers. “These should make the pain seem a lot duller, but the side effect is that you may become very drowsy. It's alright if you feel the need to sleep.”

“I am pretty sleepy already…” She closed her eyes slowly.

Ryuko remained right by her side, a small smile tugging at her lips as she watched Mako gently fall into another deep sleep.

Chapter 4: Confession Number Two

Chapter Notes

> HELLO everyone it is my birthday. This month has been kinda hectic so far so I hope you're not disappointed by this chapter!!

Days went by and Ryuko's determination to see her girlfriend healthy again didn't waver. She wondered if it was appropriate to refer to Mako as her girlfriend, even just to herself, considering Mako didn't even remember the nature of their relationship. She didn't like thinking about that concept for too long, so she decided to keep all the romantic terms (and thoughts in general) internalized for now.

Ryuko only exited the building a few times: to change her clothes, freshen up, and retrieve food more fitting to Mako's preferences rather than the hospital food. Not that the brunette was picky when it came to eating, but the older teen loved seeing her face light up at the sight of Sukuyo's steaming hot croquettes.

Every now and then a doctor or nurse would enter the room, do something to Mako neither she nor Ryuko understood the point of, and would then leave. Despite these random tests, they never had anything of significance to report. The more cheerful nurses would make conversation or comment on Ryuko's constant presence, but the other professionals just caused the room to fall silent.

When they were alone, Ryuko would lean in and tell Mako about the things she'd forgotten. Every time she spoke of the recent past, her voice would get quieter and more nostalgic. The brunette's eyes always lit up in wonder and occasionally disbelief, considering the nature of the happenings. It was difficult for Ryuko to describe certain things –the sheer atrocity that was Ragyo's very existence, the alien state of the life fibers, and what Satsuki's true intentions were with the school the entire time. Perhaps the most difficult concept to explain was Senketsu, which made for a very interesting conversation to say the least.

"The day after I met you, I went back to the ruins of my old home to sort of, well, pay my respects. The floor opened beneath me, and I tumbled down into the residence's old basement. I cut myself on my blade, and was bleeding pretty badly."

Mako gasped with concern, which Ryuko acknowledged and then continued, "The blood was just dripping *everywhere*. I was scared to death when I heard movement above the rubble under me, and I can't say I was any less startled when Senketsu emerged from it."

"Your blood awakened him?" Her eyes were wide.

“Mm-hm.” She looked down at her lap. “It was the beginning of an incomprehensible companionship. And you were the first to support me and him all the way, even when others were writing me off as insane.”

“Ooh…” Mako uttered in wonder, pondering the concept to herself. “So he talked to you, for real? The uniform?”

“Yep. But I was the only one who could hear him.”

“I’m not gonna lie to you, Ryuko-sama, that does sound a little batty.” She raised her eyebrows at her for emphasis. “But! I do believe you. How else could you have saved the world, just like you said, without the aid of an alien outfit?!”

Ryuko smiled at her. “True, but it wasn’t just me and Senketsu. You, Satsuki, and everyone else made it possible, too.”

“What? Me? Really?!” She said, placing a hand on her chest as a gesture to her being.

“Oh, definitely! You were fighting alongside me the whole time. In fact, I even tried to get rid of you a few times, if only for your own safety…but you refused. You insisted on staying with me. So, not only did you fight pretty damn well sometimes, but you also motivated me to kick some major ass,” She mused.

Make seemed to be about to speak, but then Ryuko continued, “Oh man, you should’ve seen your two-star uniform! I never admitted it out loud, but it was so badass that I was even jealous of it for a little while. Even if you only wore the design twice.”

“I had my very own goku uniform? Just for me?” She turned and shimmied to face Ryuko the best she could without messing with any IV’s. “Describe it to me!”

She was happy to oblige, her tone becoming more wistful. “The main part of it was this huge leathery jacket worn over your shoulders like a cape and fastened with gold straps. The collar was also lined in gold, and you had big red spikes on your shoulders and cuffs. You also had a big newsboy-style cap, a pair of Geta on your feet, brass knuckles with your name on them, and two life fiber stars on your waist to top it off. It was incredibly unique, and you sure knew how to wear it.”

Mako blinked at her a few times, carefully laid back down, and then stared at the ceiling wordlessly.

“Is something wrong?” Ryuko asked immediately.

“No, no, I just…” She spoke softer, “I really wish I could remember. All this stuff sounds so neat! And important…I just want to remember.”

The dark-haired girl felt her heartstrings tug empathetically. She was again reminded how it was partially her own fault Mako couldn’t remember these things. She was going to help Mako to remember *everything*, if it was the last thing she did.

She was just about to tell her that, to assure her she'd recover her memories, but then the brunette spoke again. "Can I ask you something?" She was staring at her again.

"Anything," Ryuko replied.

"If it's not too touchy of a subject…I'd really like to know how I ended up here. Especially after all that!"

"Oh! Uh, yeah, of course." She took a moment to collect her thoughts. It should've been simple enough to explain the incident without exposing the original romantic intent of the outing, but she still needed to be careful. "I suppose it's about time you know."

She took a deep breath. "As I've already told you, Honnou Town is gonna be abandoned in a couple weeks. A few days ago, you and I were…going to celebrate by going to the beach. We were riding there on my scooter, you had your arms around my waist so that you wouldn't fall off, and then, well…" She looked up at her. "Then you fell off."

Mako blinked at her. "Really?" Ryuko just nodded.

She seemed to be processing it, squinting down at her lap. Then she spoke again, "How could I be so *stupid?* Being the daughter of a doctor, I should've known better than anyone about basic travel safety!" She smacked her palm to her forehead.

Ryuko was caught off guard. "What? No, it wasn't entirely your fault at all!" She assured. "You fell asleep. Then, I sorta…accelerated too quickly. A lot of the accident was on me…I should've been more conscious of you." Her tone had become softer. "I'm sorry."

"I forgive you," She responded.

"Huh?"

"I forgive you." Mako looked at her earnestly. "I still think it's my own fault, but I can plainly see how guilty you feel about it, so I forgive you."

Ryuko stared at her in wonder. "Mako…thank you. That means a lot."

"So, is that why you've been so darn attentive to me?" She asked innocently. "You feel this is your fault?"

The dark-haired girl didn't even understand her question at first. Her expression changed to one of hurt. She eventually found the words to answer her, "Is that what you think?"

"Wha…?"

She subconsciously scooted her chair even closer to Mako's bed, and then continued. "Mako, I'm here because I care a lot about you, not just because of guilt. I know you don't really understand why I care so much because…because you don't remember what we've been through, but just understand that I really, really do, alright?" Impulsively, she had grabbed onto the smaller girl's hand with both of her own and grasped it tight.

When she didn't respond to her verbally, Ryuko traced Mako's vision to their clasped hands. She then realized what she was doing and practically yanked her hands away, mumbling an apology.

The silence following was just a little too much for Ryuko at the moment, so she stood up from her chair suddenly and walked to the door, feeling distracted. "I think I'm going to go find us some snacks or…something. Would you uh, like anything?"

The brunette stared at her lap again. "Potato chips sound pretty good," She answered. Ryuko nodded, turning the door handle. Just as she took one step out, Mako spoke again, "Wait, Ryuko-sama?"

She stepped back in. "Y-yeah?"

"I really appreciate all you've been doing for me," She told her, still looking down. "And I'm glad that you care about me so much. It feels good to be cared for, even if I am in the hospital. So, thank you." She peeked over to her.

Ryuko felt a little warmer. "No problem."

The next day, Mako was released from the hospital to go home. She was advised to still rest quite a bit, and not to overexert herself. The doctor warned her of dizzy spells, and prescribed her some special meds for any residual pain or discomfort she might experience. He also mentioned the off-chance of a seizure, in which case she would need to be brought directly back to the hospital, which made Ryuko worry.

Regardless, both girls were ecstatic to return home. Once they returned, Sukuyo had already set up a neat little space for her to rest, complete with two bedrolls stacked on top of each other for extra cushioning. She also set up another bed roll for Ryuko right next to hers, knowing already she was still going to look over her.

"How about some fresh croquettes to celebrate?" The motherly woman suggested once the girls had been situated in their home. They accepted the offered meal without question, and Ryuko wondered if Sukuyo's menu choice was due to Mako's safe return. She felt is was.

The food had a magnificent effect on her mentality, making her feel reassured and at ease somehow. Mako ate with as much zeal as ever, and then lay right down without a word. Ryuko expected her to fall asleep immediately, as was in her character, but when she looked over, the girl appeared to be distracted.

"Drowsy?" She asked her casually.

Mako rolled her head to look at her. "Sorta." She stretched wide like a cat, and then flipped onto her side to face Ryuko.

"Not in any pain, are you?" She watched her.

"Not right now," She said. "Or rather, it's very dull."

"That's good, I guess…" She didn't sound entirely convinced.

“Really, it’s fine,” Mako assured. “But I might need a nice, cozy nap soon.” She sighed in content.

Ryuko continued to watch her. She essentially stared at her, unable to take her eyes from her. Mako seemed too sleepy to notice, which she supposed was good. Since the accident, she never appeared entirely the same, always a little absent. She was consistently dazed. Still, Ryuko had hope.

Even with the noticeable difference in countenance, Mako was still her adorable self. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to resist touching her reassuringly, or even just feeling her skin. After all, before the incident she had become accustomed to doing so absentmindedly.

Then, she figured now was as good a time as any.

“Mako, there’s kind of something I haven’t told you yet.”

“Mmm, what is it?” She was drifting further into dreamland. Still, Ryuko wasn’t going to back out. It was ironic…the first time they got together, Mako was the one to confess –now, she was to be the recipient of the confession. Ryuko couldn’t help but feel nervous, regardless of the unusual situation.

“Before the accident, you and I were kinda…” She took a breath. “We were um…dating each other. Like, you know, in a relationship.”

Mako’s eyes flew open, but she didn’t sit up. “Ryuko-sama is my girlfriend?!”

“Well, yeah, kinda…” She scratched her head, averting her eyes. “You did this huge confession to me, and we had been going out for only a couple of weeks before the accident.”

The brunette smiled wide. “I’m so glad. This whole time I thought you were real cute, especially with you waiting on me and all…” She closed her eyes again slowly, and then hummed. “I’m happy I scored such a hottie.”

“Shh…go to sleep,” Ryuko instructed her, trying not to blush. She lightly stroked her hair, and felt more comfortable now in doing so. “I’ll be here when you wake up. Promise.”

The last thing Mako remembered before she hazed into unconsciousness was the softness of Ryuko’s tone, and the small smile fixed on her own face.

Chapter 5: Sympathy

Chapter Notes

> Sorry about the wait on this one. This fic is still only about half finished, so it'll have to spill over into August. I've been busy moving and working and trying to figure life out and not quite being an entire person.
>
> Anyways, August will still be getting its own fresh fic in the later days of the month.

As time passed, Mako began functioning normally again. Her sleeping schedule had been skewed by the accident, but for the most part she was back on track. Still, Ryuko always managed to wake up before her.

When both of them were awake and ready, they ventured to the kitchen to see what Sukuyo had prepared for breakfast that morning. The woman was still delighted to see her daughter finally have the energy to sit at the table with the rest of the family. As the girls took their seats, Sukuyo placed two fresh plates stacked high with bacon and eggs right in front of them. Ryuko felt her mouth begin to water.

“Is this *real* bacon?” Mako asked excitedly, inspecting a strip, still hot from the pan.

“Mhm! We got it especially for you, just because we’re so happy to see our little girl well again.”

“Aw, thanks mom!” She smiled as the woman patted her head. Ryuko felt her spirit lifted at the display of familial affection, and also at the presence of food.

They then began to eat, focused on the food rather than the silence that began to fill the room. Halfway through her second strip of bacon, Ryuko’s phone buzzed in her lap. Mako, engrossed in her food, didn’t seem to notice or care to ask about it.

The message was from Satsuki, who checked in from time to time. She did so more frequently nowadays, in light of the incident. As an attempt to invite warmth into her personality, she had been openly displaying her concern for Mako’s condition. However, she had yet to see Mako in person since the accident.

Satsuki was a very busy person, but she felt it was no excuse for her absence in the situation. She had been relaying her feelings about it to Ryuko, who took her evident concern into consideration. She was trying to find a good way and appropriate time to essentially reintroduce Satsuki to Mako.

With this in mind, Ryuko read the message. It was her sister again reminding her that she was ready and available any time to see her and Mako, whether they go to her or she come to

them, and that she'd even clear her schedule if she had to. Ryuko raised an impressed eyebrow at this. She looked up from her screen over to Mako, who was still actively shoveling food into her mouth.

Today's as good a day as any, she figured.

The dark-haired girl looked back at her phone, and pressed the screen to reply. '*We can meet you somewhere*,' she typed first, and then thought to herself. She supposed it might be a bit shocking for someone like Satsuki, who was practically a celebrity to Mako, to just walk into her house. '*Just meet us at that one restaurant Mako used to like around 6 for dinner. The one a couple blocks down from our place.*'

She placed the phone down next to her and then looked back to her meal. She glanced over to Mako's plate and noticed it to be clean…practically spotless.

"You gonna finish that?" Mako asked her.

-

Hours later, Ryuko and Mako were meandering down the street together to the agreed meet-up point. Ryuko considered getting them there on her scooter, but quickly scrapped the idea. She wasn't ready to be driving again, especially since they didn't have any helmets.

Mako had totally dolled herself up for the occasion once she heard Satsuki would be involved in the outing. She wore one of her favorite sundresses she had found but didn't remember she had: it was white and printed with large, colorful hibiscus flowers, which she wore with a sensible pair of wedge sandals.

Ryuko noticed she seemed kind of nervous, or excited, or both. She did her best to remind the girl that she and the former president were much closer than she could remember, that she was much like family to Satsuki now. Still, she seemed a bit frazzled.

After that, they kept walking side by side in relative silence. Ryuko would discreetly glance at Mako's face every now and then, watching her expression change as her thoughts did. In one instance, when Ryuko was staring straight ahead and lost in her own thoughts, she felt a small, warm hand intertwine with her own. She looked over to see Mako smiling timidly at her. While her shyness was out of character, she still enjoyed holding her hand.

They reached the corner early, no Satsuki yet in sight. This was fine with Ryuko, who faced Mako and took her other hand in her own.

"Mako." She looked into her eyes. "I know you've been through a whole lot in a short amount of time. I want to make this experience as comfortable as possible for you, so don't be afraid to speak up if it becomes too overwhelming, alright?"

Mako looked up at her, blinking slowly. "Thanks, Ryuko-sama…" She said. "But I think I'm ready for this."

She smiled and squeezed her hands. "Good."

A few minutes later, Satsuki strolled up to the two of them, looking as put together as ever. She was wearing an A-line skirt with a high waist, the ends of a ruffled blouse tucked into the waistband, and a pair of black flats. Mako gasped audibly when she caught sight of her.

“Satsuki-sama!” She bowed immediately. “You-you cut your hair! It’s all gone!”

Right…Ryuko might’ve forgotten to mention that to her. It was pretty recently she had gotten it cut anyway; it was only a few weeks ago that Satsuki had surprised the both of them with her new do.

The woman smiled politely, running her fingers through her now-short hair. “You like it?”

Mako seemed to stumble on her thoughts. “It’s very pretty! Suits you well, but then again anything would!”

Satsuki offered a light chuckle, “Thank you, Mako.”

The brunette’s eyes went wide as she clasped her hands over her mouth in surprise. She had just addressed her directly, and by her first name! Ryuko could only imagine how star-struck Mako felt right now. Despite being worried about her, Ryuko was now a little humored by Mako’s oblivious actions. Satsuki seemed a bit concerned (Ryuko could read this in her face), but she knew it’d be alright. The real concern was in finding a solution.

“Shall we be going, then?” Satsuki suggested.

“Right, yeah.” Ryuko shook her head. “Lead the way, sis.”

Mako’s head snapped over to Ryuko at the word ‘sis’, the same surprise evident on her face. She watched as Mako then forced a more neutral expression, likely remembering that this was one of many things the old Mako was accustomed to. Ryuko patted her shoulder.

From their meet-up point, it was a brief walk to the restaurant. The girls remained relatively silent as they got there, waited for seating, and then were assigned to a booth per their preference. While it wasn’t completely uncomfortable, it was a bit awkward. Ryuko noticed Mako glancing at Satsuki several times over the duration of their short trek, her expression indecipherable.

Ryuko and Mako beside one another on one side of the booth, and Satsuki sat opposite them, poised in the center of her large seat. They all silently agreed to start their discussion after the waitress came around to take their order and for this reason, they kept their menus to their faces in the meantime.

Once the server finally came by and took their drink orders, Ryuko decided to speak up. “So I think Mako’s made considerable progress so far,” She got to the point.

“Really? That’s good,” Satsuki said, looking toward Mako so as to not seem like she couldn’t chime in.

“Yeah,” Ryuko continued. “I mean, obviously she still doesn’t *remember* anything…” She swallowed. “But we’ve done a good job on filling her in. I tried to catch her up as much as I

could while she was in the hospital, and then her family helped show her around the house and also the immediate area…which has apparently not changed all that much since what she actually remembers."

Mako nodded swiftly at this account. Satsuki was impressed at how well the both of them were keeping it together, from the steadiness of Ryuko's tone to the patience in Mako's countenance.

"I still really really want my memories back!" She said. "All the stuff Ryuko-sama has told me so far seems so cool…" Satsuki looked to Ryuko quizzically at the phrase 'Ryuko-sama'. Mako continued, "I mean, especially the whole two-star uniform thing!"

"Ah yes, that," Satsuki recalled. The waitress came by with their drinks, and then gave them another moment before ordering. "Iori had a lot of fun designing that just for you. It was a very unique, ingenious design."

Mako pouted, and then rested her elbows on the table. She looked toward Ryuko like a lost puppy. Ryuko gave her a sympathetic look, feeling the strong urge to console her again.

Satsuki cleared her throat, feeling a bit disappointed herself. "Anyway, I'm glad we came together today. I have a suggestion that should aid in recovering Mako's memory."

Ryuko, who had been sipping her drink, about did a spit take. "And you waited until now? Tell us!"

Just as she was about to, the waitress returned for their food orders. Ryuko had already known hers, Satsuki was rather specific with hers (she had some alterations), and Mako wasn't even ready, as she was rather indecisive when it came to tasty food. After a couple minutes, she finally settled on an entrée, and Ryuko was more than eager to hear Satsuki's idea.

Once the waitress walked away, Ryuko gave Satsuki a desperate look, prompting her to speak again. "Well, it's fairly simple, but it might've escaped your mind through all this, well, emotional turmoil. Anyway, my suggestion would be to take Mako here to the places you've told her about. I know a lot of them have practically been destroyed, but it wouldn't hurt her to have a visual as you retell the memories you've created in each respective place."

"That's…that's not a bad idea at all." Ryuko perked up. "Couldn't hurt, I suppose…" She turned to Mako. "What do you think?"

"That sounds really exciting! Traveling around with Ryuko-sama…hearing all those crazy stories in context…I would love to!" She beamed.

Ryuko returned the smile. "Alright then, sounds like a plan!" She looked back to her sister. "But…what about getting to those places? How could we do that?"

"I would be glad to lend you some money for bus fare or gas for your scooter," Satsuki offered.

The dark-haired girl gulped at the mention of the scooter. “Hate to ask, but uh, could we also have money for some helmets?”

“Of course,” She assured, as she figured that to be a new given. “But I suggest you start your little journey soon. Honnou Town will be demolished in little over a week, so any places you want to visit here will need to be covered soon.”

“Thank you so much, Satsuki-sama!” Mako chimed in.

“We can start tomorrow, if you’d like,” Ryuko spoke to her, her tone soft.

“Sounds perfect!”

Chapter 6: Remains

The next morning, it was Mako who awakened first. She wasn't up long before she decided to wake Ryuko up as well; the way she did so might not have been conventional, but it was certainly adorable. Ryuko transitioned to consciousness, her eyes fluttering open, her entire field of vision consumed by Mako's bright and eager face.

Her eyes widened, and Mako sat up. She had been sitting on her lap, which gave Ryuko enough room to prop herself up on her arms, but not to sit up completely. She didn't mind –in fact, she was amused.

She rubbed the sleep from her eye. "Looking forward to today?"

"Yes!" Mako responded with notable enthusiasm.

"I'm glad you're excited," Ryuko said. "We can make it really fun."

"Definitely!" She was still sitting on top of her. "So, where are we going first?"

That was a good question. As Ryuko was trying to fall asleep the previous night, this was the question that had been on her mind. There were a few given places she knew she was going to take her, but she hadn't been sure where they'd go first. Talking to Mako now, she figured they'd start at the beginning. "We're going to Honnouji Academy."

It was a solid plan. The remains of the school were within walking distance, if one had the time. Ryuko knew they'd have to be careful, though; a condemned building is dangerous to walk through for many reasons. There could be shady people lurking there, or worse –one of them might fall through a weak floor and they'd have another medical bill on their hands.

They also had the generous amount of money Satsuki had given them, but today they might not even need to use any of it if they played their cards right. Well, maybe, given they didn't stop anywhere for food.

The two girls spent a few hours lazing around, preparing themselves, and then headed out around noon. They filled Mako's parents in on their plan, waving Sukuyo goodbye as they went out to tackle their day.

"I remember the way there," Mako said proudly as they started walking.

"I'm glad," Ryuko replied. She figured she would remember, considering her most recent memories were of school, but she wanted to validate her confidence.

Ryuko stuck her hands in her pockets as she began pondering the Mako that existed before she knew her. It was certainly interesting to think about. The brunette hardly talked about her life before, only answering specific questions when asked. But now, that concept of new and old was all muddled.

She hadn't considered the short silence that had fallen between them until Mako broke it. "Ryuko-sama?"

"Yeah?" She looked over to her.

"I know I said this before, but…" She began, "I'm happy I have you helping me out. It means a lot that you're going through all this trouble."

Ryuko was touched by this, even though they both knew it was her fault they were in this situation in the first place. Again, she remembered this was the old Mako she was talking to…the Mako that hadn't had any close friends. The Mako that spent the majority of her time on her own, going to school day in day out with nothing of note ever happening. This was the Mako before the storm.

"It's no trouble," Ryuko said earnestly. Then, she watched as Mako held out her hand where she could see it in a not-so-subtle way of inviting her to hold it. She pulled her own hand from her pocket and grasped hers without second thought. Mako began swung their arms back and forth as they continued walking.

"So," The brunette started again. "What did you think of Honnouji when you first started attending?"

Ryuko wasn't sure how to answer that, so she started talking before thinking. "To be honest, I was never looking at it from an academic standpoint, not for a second."

"Me neither!" She jested, and Ryuko chuckled at her before continuing.

"Honnouji was just a means of reaching my goal, nothing else." She looked ahead into the distance. "I got a lead there, and the rest was history."

"Ooh…" Mako stared over at her, in awe of her conviction.

They both though quietly for a moment, and then the shorter girl spoke again. "School was my whole life, so I tried to teach myself to like it. I found little things to appreciate, like the nicer mornings on the way there, or when the lunches were edible. But eventually, I gave up and started sleeping through classes instead."

Ryuko frowned. She knew Mako's life had significantly improved since what she remembered…it all felt like lost progress. She subconsciously picked up the pace a tad –the sooner they got there, the sooner she could begin to attempt to fix all this.

The brunette matched her stride, and then continued. "I was put in all remedial classes, so they never expected much from me anyway."

Suddenly, Ryuko stopped in her tracks. Mako halted next to her and looked up at her quizzically. "It was right here," The taller girl stated.

"What was?"

"This is the spot where we first met." She looked over at her.

“Here?” She tilted her head. “Not at school?”

“Did I not tell you that story?” Mako shook her head. “Well then, here-” She took a quick glance around, and then spotted a bench. “Let’s sit down for a while and I’ll tell you.”

They both plopped down on the bench simultaneously, and then Ryuko cleared her throat to begin her explanation. “I had first gotten into town. I intended on familiarizing myself with the area some, and then heading over to Honnouji to scope it out.”

“Was it a school day?” She gasped. “Were you going to be *late?*”

“Yep,” She smiled at how flabbergasted she was. “And I was.”

Mako’s eyes widened, but Ryuko kept talking. “Anyway, I was walking around when I saw a street vendor selling fruit. I kinda have a thing for acidic stuff, so I bought myself a ripe lemon, figuring why not.”

“When do I come into the story?” She asked eagerly.

“In a sec, in a sec,” She placated her. “So I continued walking, when who of all people should try to pull one over on me? Your brother.”

“Mataro? Really?” She then grumbled, “That little brat…”

“Mhm. He thought he was slick. He was going for my wallet, but he ended up swiping my lemon. Shoulda seen the look on his face. He called his little friends over to defend him, and well, after I roughed them up…that’s where you came in.”

Mako had been listening closely, as if she was sharing the most engrossing of fantasy tales. “Did I stop him?”

“Yep. You pinned him down and told him to get his ass moving, which he did.”

“Good,” She said under her breath.

“After that, you apologized to me very quickly, and then bolted off, frantic over the possibility of being late yourself.”

She looked at her and then continued, “It was one of the weirdest first impressions ever.”

“Really? Oh man, did you think I was crazy?!”

“Well, kinda, but not necessarily in a bad way.” She looked away again. “I didn’t really know what to think. But then I got to school and got seated next to you, as you requested. After that, I thought you were even *more* crazy. But it became endearing, to me at least.” She became quieter, “Your unpredictable personality became one of the only things I could count on. It was reassuring, your incomprehensibility.”

“Ryuko-sama…” Mako blinked, and suddenly, rapid snapshots of inexplicable and indescribable images flashed through her mind, far too quick to decipher. Her head began to

spin, and she rested her forehead in her hands.

“Something wrong?” Ryuko asked with evident concern.

“I don’t know, I feel dizzy and…” She rubbed her head. “Your name, how I say it? It feels wrong in my mouth, somehow…”

Ryuko turned to face her completely. “Are you remembering something? Anything?” She knew exactly what she meant by ‘wrong’ what with the honorific, but she wanted to see if she could figure it out.

“No, I don’t…” She sighed. “I don’t think so. But can we sit here for a few more minutes?”

“Yeah, of course,” She told her, placing a supportive hand on her back.

After another five minutes, Mako’s world came back properly into view, and she felt comfortable continuing their little journey. She now had a small headache, but it was manageable. Ryuko held her hand again as they walked, if only for the sake of her stability. She wanted to ask a bit more about her sudden discomfort, but she figured she’d speak up if she felt like sharing.

The sun beat down on them relentlessly as the remains of the school finally appeared over the horizon. Mako became less affected by exertion and more focused on discovering what the building had become. She practically jogged once she caught sight of the former institution, dragging Ryuko along with her.

Ryuko had no problem keeping up with the smaller girl, but she almost bumped into her when she stopped in her tracks. They stood together at the entrance of the school, the brunette staring upwards in astonishment.

“I can’t believe it…” She muttered.

“Can’t you?” She jested. “You know Satsuki ruled with an iron fist. This place was gonna get destroyed eventually, one way or another.”

“I guess…”

“It will be mostly restored by the end of the month, anyway. Satsuki wants it fixed up one more time just for the graduation ceremony. I think it’s a waste of resources, but whatever.”

“I wish we could’ve gone later, then…after they fixed it back up.” She pouted.

“No time,” She said simply. “We wouldn’t want to get in their way. Plus, I wanted to try to get you back to normal as soon as possible.”

Still, Mako seemed a little down. “It’s probably best this way,” Ryuko continued. “Now instead of just telling you how the school got destroyed, I can show you.” She began walking toward the building. “Coming?”

Mako shook her head, as if to break herself from her daze. “Yeah!”

The most noticeable thing about the structure was definitely the musky smell. Though it had only been a month since school 'let out', the place looked as though it had been abandoned for years: faulty lighting dangling from the ceiling, scraps of paper strewn about the floor, and paint chipping away from the walls. Ryuko wondered if the air was even safe to breathe.

As they continued cautiously trekking the hallway, Mako spoke again. "Are you *sure* I've only forgotten the past few months or so? There's no way it could've gotten this bad this quickly!"

"Well, aside from the stuff that went down with Ragyo and all that…" She thought aloud. "There's also the possibility of vandals. Trespassers."

"Aren't we trespassing then?"

"No silly, Satsuki gave us permission, remember?"

"Right," She acknowledged under her breath.

They had walked up two flights of stairs and turned a few more hallways before they finally found themselves in front of the door of their old classroom. The name on the plate to the right of the door was still perfectly legible, reading, "Mikisugi". Ryuko hadn't been in the school since the man's cover was blown, but you'd think someone would've removed that by now. Regardless, she grabbed the doorknob and opened the door, which was thankfully unlocked.

"Be careful, Mako." She led her inside. "I still have no idea how stable these floors are."

At this instruction, Mako began comically tiptoeing into the room. However, when she caught sight of her old desk, she virtually dove into it. "This is my seat!" She said proudly.

"Yep," She walked over to her and sat in the seat to her left, "And this one's mine."

The brunette looked to her with wide eyes. "Aw, Ryuko-sama! Being classmates *and* desk buddies must've been so cool!"

Ryuko didn't really know how to respond to that in an equally cheery way, so she didn't try. She was beginning to feel an odd emotion, one she hadn't felt in a while –unrelenting nostalgia. It was odd, considering the period of her life she experienced at this school was by far one of the most difficult. Still, she remembered exactly what it was like to sit in that very same chair, not paying attention to the lesson but instead forming plans to avenge her dad, Senketsu reminding her to remain calm and think clearly. It was strange how irrelevant that concept was now.

"What are you thinking about?" Mako questioned, leaning into her considerably.

"Oh, just Senketsu and all that stuff," Ryuko answered outright, and then looked to her. "Hey, did you know you used to give me running hugs?" She smiled.

"That sounds like me," She admitted. "That's how I show someone they're my bestie. Old Mako must've taken to you right away!"

She chuckled. “She sure did.”

“New Mako is pretty fond of you, too,” She told her, twiddling her thumbs on the desktop.

“Yeah?” Ryuko vocalized, trying not to appear bashful.

“Mhm,” Mako responded simply, leaning her head onto her shoulder. “Tell me more about what went down here?”

Almost an hour passed by as Ryuko retold the various stories and complications involved in her effort to discover her dad’s murderer, starting with what went down in that classroom. Mako was notably surprised to learn that Mikisugi had been undercover all along, but Ryuko told her to really think about it for a moment –did he *really* seem like a serious and credible man? After just a moment of critical thought, even Mako agreed that he did not.

After they were done in the classroom, they left the indoors and entered the commons of the schoolyard, which was more frequently used as an arena in its day. They were both relieved to be outdoors again in the fresh air. A light breeze picked up their hair and the loose ends of their clothing as they stood there, the area hauntingly silent.

“That’s where she stood,” Ryuko spoke, pointing upwards at a considerable angle. “That ledge is where Satsuki perched, looking down on us all.” She glanced down to Mako. “I used to really hate her.”

The brunette gasped. “You used to *hate* Satsuki-sama?”

“Absolutely! I was under the impression for a long time that she was the one who killed my dad. And even though she wasn’t, the way she wouldn’t tell me…and how lofty she was…” She began grumbling. “Just pissed me off.”

“Who was the girl who did it again? The one who killed your dad?” Mako asked, only having been told once in the past. “I think her name began with an ‘N’?”

“Yep,” She spoke. “*Nui Harime*. She was one of Ragyo’s main lackeys, the *Grand Couturier*, or master seamstress. Ragyo literally birthed her from the main life fiber, remember?” She looked into the distance, squinting slightly. “And I thought I hated Satsuki.”

“Ryuko-sama is just full of rage, huh?”

“Not anymore,” She said, relaxing again. Ryuko was always calmed by the fact that Nui, as well as Ragyo, were dead forever. “You really helped me with that, you know. I know I say that a lot, but you did an incredible job calming me down.” Before Mako had a chance to speak, she continued, “That reminds me! There was a story I was saving just for here. Are you ready?”

“Of course!” She responded with enthusiasm.

Ryuko then sat right on the ground, and invited the smaller girl to join her. “It’s not a short story,” She said simply, offering her hand to lower her to her level.

“Alright,” She began once they were situated, sitting cross-legged in the dirt. “I only waited to tell you, well, because I’m kind of ashamed. Definitely not one of my proudest moments. You remember the portion of the story where I had to battle the four elites individually? And then as I was fighting Sanageyama, Nui decided to introduce herself?”

“I do now.” She nodded once in determination.

“Once I discovered who Nui truly was and what she’d done, I lost it, in every sense of the word.” She glared down at the ground. “It wasn’t enough that she’d done what she did, she had the most infuriating personality. She had this super high-pitched voice and she’d just never *shut up*…”

“Aw, did she tease you?”

“Yeah, but it was more than that,” She said. “I hated everything about her.”

“Guess you could say you hated *every fiber* of her being,” Mako said, nudging her with her elbow. Not only did she love to make a flagrant pun, but she was also eager to show her understanding of the concept of life fibers.

“Mako.” She looked toward her a single eyebrow raised.

“Sorry,” She mumbled.

“Anyway,” Ryuko continued, shaking the silly pun from her mind. “Right, I lost it. My blood quite literally began to boil, racing through my veins at a thoroughly dangerous speed, leaving Senketsu unable to control himself. He became ravenous, and eventually consumed me. I literally became a monster.”

Mako covered her mouth with her hands, and the dark-haired girl continued. “I’ve been told I looked grotesque, but obviously I had no way of knowing. I hardly remember anything from when it happened…all I know is I became a killing machine. Everyone nearby was trying to subdue me, even if that meant killing me.”

“What?!”

“Yeah. They knew tranquilizers weren’t going to do it, so Satsuki stepped in. They weren’t going to try to reason with me, which made sense. The thing was…I was already losing blood at an alarming rate. I’ve been told that’s around when you caught on to the true severity of the situation.”

“Good!”

“Your family arrived, and you jumped into the truck, no time to explain. You got real close to the standoff between Satsuki and me, and then dove in, grasping me as tightly as you could. Satsuki let you intervene. You began sobbing, talking about the time I brought *you* back to normal, saying that it was your turn to do the same for me.” She looked at her affectionately. “My body temperature was unnaturally high, I was extremely unstable and dangerous, but you were unrelenting. It was more than just calming me down, you saved my life.”

Ryuko then allowed the gravity of that statement to linger between them. It then occurred to her that she had never even told the 'old' Mako how grateful she was, how much it meant to her that she saved her life like that. Sure, she protected Mako with her own life constantly and without question, but she never expected her to do the same for her. But she did. Mako put her own life on the line in hopes of helping, not even knowing if it was already a lost cause at that point…

"Is that how we are to each other?" Mako asked quietly.

"Huh?"

"Obviously I didn't know because I can't remember, but…" She looked into her eyes. "Is that how we were? Always risking our lives to save each other's? Because this isn't the first story like that you've told me…"

"Without question."

"So we really care about each other that much?" She spoke, trying to comprehend the true significance of their bond.

"Mako, it's not just that. Our impulses to protect each other's lives were just that –impulses. We did it without second thought. Or at least, I did…but you seemed to, too. That's our whole dynamic…support and protection."

"Really?" The brunette asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"And incomprehensibility, of course."

Chapter 7: Snacks

“I’ve always wanted to go to Osaka!” Mako chirped, clutching her backpack to her chest in excitement. “This is gonna be so fun!”

“I already told you, Mako,” Ryuko looked at her sympathetically. “We’ve already been there. That’s why we’re going now…I also wanted to visit Kyoto and Kobe, you know ‘cause that’s where Satsuki did her raids, but there’s just not enough time.”

“Why did you choose Osaka then?”

“Because it’s where we met back up after I retrieved every bit of Senketsu. You seemed to be having a lot of fun in there when I found you, so I thought you’d like to visit there the most,” She explained. “Plus, in Kyoto and Kobe, I only collected Senketsu’s scraps. More stuff went down in Osaka.”

Mako had practically vibrated into the ceiling the night before when Ryuko told her of her plans for the next day. The brunette had known they’d been there before from Ryuko’s detailed account of what she missed, but she had no idea they’d actually go all the way there! She couldn’t wait to sample all the city’s trademark street food, as she’d told Ryuko, who knew then that’d they’d definitely be spending quite a bit of the money Satsuki gave them.

Now, they stood and waited for the bus. Again, Ryuko could’ve taken the both of them there on her scooter, but it was a long drive and the gas expense alone would be pricey. The bus was cheaper and more efficient.

The bus was on time, arriving at 10 A.M. exactly. Mako darted straight aboard, and Ryuko stepped on afterward, inserting enough coins for the both of them. The smaller girl had chosen one of the seats in the very back, away from the considerable number of people who were seated closer to the front.

They had a two hour wait in front of them, giving them about two hours to sit, wait, and enjoy the passing scenery. Ryuko hadn’t brought anything with her entertainment-wise, but she didn’t think it would be a problem with Mako there.

Just as she had this thought, Mako pulled a decent sized sack out of her backpack. She produced two pairs of chopsticks seemingly from nowhere; Ryuko was pretty sure the girl had wished them into existence. She handed a pair to Ryuko, and then opened the bag. She stuffed a single croquette into her mouth before offering with a muffled voice, “Croquette?”

Ryuko blinked, smiled politely, and then replied, “Sure.”

After they finished eating, the older teen rightfully expected her bubbly friend to start rambling on about how eager she was for Osaka, but instead, Mako fell asleep. She slept most of the way there, her head resting gently on Ryuko’s shoulder. She wondered if she had gotten enough sleep the previous night; it was likely Mako was too excited to get a full night’s rest.

When the vehicle eventually came to a halt, she reached a hand over to lightly shake Mako's shoulder. "We're here," Ryuko told her as she blinked awake. "We're at the-"

"We're in Osaka?!" Mako stood up immediately and pressed her whole face to the nearest window.

"Mhm! Now-"

Before Ryuko could continue, Mako had somehow wiggled her way to the front of the bus. "Are you coming, Ryuko-sama?" She asked, tapping her foot at the door.

"*How did she do that?*" She whispered to herself before joining the girl.

Together, the two stepped into the bustling city that was Osaka. They stood next to one another on the sidewalk, unsure of where to go first, people avoiding bumping into them in the process. There was so much around –shops, restaurants, stands, etc.-that it was quite a bit overwhelming. Mako's eyes went wide with anticipation.

The brunette's head swiveled to look up at Ryuko, "Can we eat first?"

The older teen thought for a moment and then said, "But we just ate on the bus…"

Mako didn't respond to this; rather, she put on her best puppy face and continued to bear her gaze into Ryuko's. She didn't waver for the moment she had to hold the expression before Ryuko finally caved. "Alright," She exhaled. "Where would you like to eat?"

Mako had originally pointed to just one food stand, but they ended up going to several. They bought stuff to eat immediately, and also snacks they could carry along on their little journey. Once the brunette was content with the chunk of Satsuki's money they had spent on food, they found a small outdoor table to sit and eat at.

"So, what part of the story are you showing me today?" Mako asked.

"You'll have to wait and see," She said, tossing something fried into her mouth. Mako frowned slightly. "When we get there." Truthfully, Ryuko was distracted by how authentically delicious the food was. It didn't compare to the homeliness factor of Mako's mother's cooking, but there was definitely something to be said about the interesting flavor.

Thankfully, the school that was originally involved in the raid trip (the one formally dominated by Kaneo Takarada) was not a long distance from where they were. Once they polished off their lunches, their journey resumed.

Mako had calmed down only a little once she had the opportunity to take it all in, though she still seemed to be a bit distracted on their walk over. Along the way, Ryuko told her that she had practically visited every stand the first time she was there, filling her backpack to its capacity with purchased goods. The brunette wasn't surprised, as she admitted she had the impulse to do it again.

After twenty minutes, they arrived at the general area where the grand battle between Ryuko and Satsuki had transpired. The place was no longer a wreck, which was to be expected.

However, it did make it harder for Ryuko to remember where exactly certain things occurred.

“This is as good a spot as any,” Ryuko spoke, slowing down.

“Here?” Mako asked, looking around at the environment. They were a little ways away from the city’s high school, the building visible in the near distance. It seemed like any other part of the city, a decent amount of people around.

“Mhm,” She acknowledged, and then offered the girl her hand. “Ready?”

“Yes!” She affirmed, grasping her hand tightly.

“Alright, so the story here starts with me –as it always does. Except now, I’m zooming into the scene on this sweet motorcycle I jacked, and I’ve finally collected most of Senketsu’s scraps.”

“Oh, from when Nui chopped him into little itty-bitty pieces, right?”

“That’s right,” She said. “I had every last piece of him…except his Seki Tekko. Do you remember who had that part?”

“Hmm…” Mako tapped her chin in thought. “It was Satsuki-sama, right? Because this was when you guys were all aggressive with each other?”

“Yeah, it was her. It’s funny to me that you only know us as friendly, considering how much time her and I spent as bitter rivals.” She drummed her fingertips on the back of the girl’s hand. “I kinda like that concept, actually. It’s innocent.”

Mako tilted her head, not quite getting what she meant by that. Still, Ryuko continued, “But yeah, Satsuki was wearing the Seki Tekko. Obviously, she had it to bait me out. And it worked, I mean, I couldn’t have gotten by without it. So, I crashed her little party with Takarada-”

“Takarada?”

“That sleazy guy who not only controlled the school but the whole city using his own printed money?”

“Oh yeah, you mentioned him!”

“I didn’t see much of him, but that’s who I was told she was fighting. Didn’t matter to me, you know what I was after.” She squinted for a moment, “He wasn’t even her real objective. She had an ulterior motive -to destroy the Nudist Beach headquarters, and Nonon did end up doing a good number on it, but that was relevant later.”

Her countenance eased up a bit. “Anyway, I got there, totally fixated on getting the Seki Tekko back, and then I finally met back up with you. I didn’t even know you went on the trip, so I was both surprised and worried to see you there.”

“Worried?”

“It was dangerous. Virtually everyone there was battling to the death, and you were in the crossfire. Actually, part of the Disciplinary Committee was in the process of seizing you, but I got there just in time and stopped them. Using force, of course.”

“Aw, man! What’d I do?”

Ryuko smiled down at her, “You were truant, busy buying out all the stands in town.”

“Oh, right. Sounds like me,” She mumbled downwards.

“I couldn’t just leave you there all endangered-like, so you got on the back of my cycle with me. Figured we could plunge into the trouble together, as we had always done before.” She then adopted a more wistful tone, “To be honest, though I was concerned to see you there, I was also relieved. It was pretty comforting, and in turn, motivating.”

“Aw…” Mako vocalized, kicking a pebble with her shoe. “I’m glad I could help Ryuko-sama. So you got all of him back then, right? Senketsu?”

“*Of* course.” Ryuko grinned proudly.

“And you won the fight then? With Satsuki?”

“Well, not exactly.” The brunette gave her a knowing look, and then she spurred to defend herself. “I told you, it was a draw! Literally neck-and-neck. You had my scissor blade with you, protecting it. You tried to give it to me when I needed it, but Gamagoori stopped you.”

“Dang it!”

“Yeah, but you got it to me right after. I managed without it anyway -I literally blind-sighted Satsuki using Senketsu and the blood flowing through him…she didn’t *see* it coming, and I had the perfect window of opportunity to seize her precious Bakuzan.”

“Was that a *pun?*” Mako asked, a mix of surprise and admiration in her voice.

“Yes. But anyway, I held it to her neck, but unfortunately she could turn her Kamui to a blade, too,” She explained. “It was, by all means, a fair draw. We mutually decided to stand down, and well, that’s where the story in Osaka ends.”

“Wow…all that bloodshed, right here where we’re standing…” She looked toward the ground during their slow-paced walk. “Must’ve been exciting!”

“It was definitely something…”

“Did we do anything else in Osaka after that? Anything fun?” She asked eagerly.

“I don’t think I’d describe it as *fun*, but you seemed to have a good time exploring the remains of the Nudist Beach’s HQ,” She told her, and then muttered next, “It *was* kinda interesting to see.”

Mako stopped walking, let go of her hand, and sat down on a bench they were about to pass up. Ryuko looked to her, her expression the equivalent of a question mark, which warranted Mako to state simply, “I wanted to sit.”

The dark-haired girl shrugged and sat with her. Before saying anything else, Mako reached into her bag and pulled out one of the many snacks they had purchased. She opened the bag and slowly ate a chip, as if she were suspicious of it. Ryuko watched her with mild curiosity.

Then, the smaller girl spoke again, “Tell me about it.”

“About what? The Nudist Beach headquarters? I’d rather-”

“No, not that necessarily, but like, the environment at the time? How were you feeling? What did it look like, instead of this normal, pristine city? I wanna feel like I was there, in the battle,” She explained dramatically, and then reached for another chip.

“Well, I’m not sure about that, but…” She thought aloud, amused by the girl. “You know Satsuki and I have fought a lot before. What makes this battle so special?”

“*Osaka!*” She said emphatically. “Not just that, but you know, we came all the way here. Might as well drink in the history.”

Ryuko wasn’t sure she’d consider the things she and Satsuki did there to be *history*, but well, in the grand scheme of things…“You’re right,” She realized.

The older teen then explained to Mako, in great detail, every feeling she experienced there on that makeshift battlefield. Every moment of panic when she lost her footing, every second of faltering unconsciousness, and every bead of sweat that had traced her temples. She told her all the thoughts she could remember from the fight, and every emotion she felt from the outcome. Throughout her prolonged explanation, Mako watched her with fascinated eyes, her heart telling her things her brain just didn’t understand yet.

“So…yeah,” Ryuko finished lamely, having really gotten into her feelings.

“Ryuko-sama…” The smaller girl spoke. “I’m real proud of you.”

“Huh?”

“I’m proud of you!” She repeated. “You went through so much, and you’re still alive –and willing- to tell the tale. And you’re *still* going through so much. I’ve just never met someone so…resilient. Maybe that’s why old Mako really clung to you also.” She established firm eye contact, “I’m going to try super hard to remember everything, okay? Not just for me, for you, too.”

Ryuko stared back at her and then grinned wide. “Right. We’ll do it together.”

They traversed the town for a couple hours more, just exploring and doing even more light shopping. They eventually decided to leave before the sun set. Later, on the late bus heading back home, Mako lay down in Ryuko’s lap in a very casual manner, intent on falling asleep. The dark-haired girl had almost expected it to happen, and when it did, she cautiously ran her

fingers through the girl's short hair. When Mako nuzzled into her touch, she continued until she was sure she had fallen asleep, and even some time after.

They had another busy day ahead of them.

Chapter 8: Hold On

Ryuko hadn't set any certain time for them to wake up the next morning. She knew they'd have plenty of time in the day for her next plan, so she didn't bother with an alarm or a wake-up call. In fact, the both of them had ended up sleeping well past noon. Sometimes, Ryuko suspected Mako could sleep endlessly if she wasn't woken up by an external factor.

She had subconsciously expected Mako to wake up before her again, as she had the past few days. Part of her had gotten used to waking up with the girl but a hair's width away from her, asking what her plan for the day was. This day was only slightly different --the second Ryuko had woken up and then sat up, Mako essentially mimicked her movement.

"Oh, good morning, Mako," She said, rubbing her eye. "Have you been up?"

"No, just woke up like you, silly!"

Ryuko looked her over, as if to search for evidence of recent sleepiness. "Sure," She said simply. "Anyway, you ready for today?"

"Of course I am!" Mako said, clasping her hands together. "But um, are you going to tell me where were going first? I know I really had to work to get it out of you before, like it was supposed to be a surprise or whatever, but-"

"Nope."

"Aw, come on!"

"No, really, today really is going to be a surprise. The story I have to tell with the place we're going…I didn't really tell you about before," She admitted.

"What?! There's stuff you *haven't* told me?" The brunette asked with genuine astonishment.

"Mostly just the stuff I'm going to tell you about today," She responded, grinning mischievously.

"No fair! Stop being so confusing!" Mako whined, and then pulled out her puppy face tactic once more. Ryuko couldn't help but look, feeling persuaded for only a split second before tearing her eyes away and insisting 'no'. The brunette only whined more after this, causing Mataro to peek his head in and tell them both to shut up.

A few hours after that even, the girls still hadn't left for the evening. Mako had been ready for quite a while by then, as she could always be prepared on a whim. She had really become addicted to these little outings with Ryuko, to say the least. Inside, she really hoped that even after these efforts to recover her memory, she'd still take her to exciting places.

"Ryuko-sama! Are you ready yet?" Her high-pitched voice called from outside the bathroom.

“Hmm…no, not yet!” She insisted. Inside the bathroom, Ryuko *was* ready –she had actually been ready before Mako even, as she never did do much primping. She had her cellphone in hand, waiting for a confirmation text from Satsuki; once her sister gave her the go-ahead, they’d set out, but then and only then. Ryuko didn’t necessarily *like* teasing Mako, but it was admittedly cute how she’d respond to it –but Ryuko, too, just wished Satsuki would hurry up.

At four in the afternoon, they finally left the house, Mako nearly bouncing as she exited the door.

“Where are we headed?” She asked eagerly.

“I told you, it’s a surprise,” The seemingly-aloof girl answered.

“Are we walking there?” She played along.

Ryuko seemed to take a moment to think before answering. “No, actually.” She stopped in her tracks. “Follow me.”

Mako then followed Ryuko around to the back of the house, where the taller girl then removed the cover off of her brand-new, shiny red scooter. “Can’t believe I almost forgot,” She mumbled. Then, she leaned over to pick up the two helmets that were lying in the grass on the other side of the vehicle.

“A scooter?” Mako tilted her head. “Is it the one we were using when-”

“No, it’s not,” She interrupted. “I sold that one. Maybe it was a silly length to go to, but…” She placed a hand on the scooter’s handle. “Now we can create brand new memories for the both of us here on this scooter. How’s that sound?”

The brunette leaned over and took one of the helmets from Ryuko’s hand, and then placed it on the taller girl’s head as though it were a crown. “Sounds perfect.”

After making sure Mako’s helmet was strapped on perfectly, and also assuring that she was gripping onto her tightly, Ryuko hit the gas. It felt good to feel the wind on her face again, as well as Mako’s arms around her waist. Ryuko found herself enjoying the ride despite being scared for so long.

She took the roads she remembered all too well, their destination only a mere ten minutes away at this speed. They rode over the concrete hills, Mako no doubt wondering when they might stop. However, her question had been answered when they pulled up next to Satsuki in one of the town’s many shopping squares.

“Satsuki-sama!” Mako greeted, hopping off the scooter. “What’re you doing here?”

“She’s here to…here to…” Ryuko spoke, trying to find the words. She got off the scooter as well, removing her helmet slowly.

“I’m here to help retell your very first date with my little sister,” Satsuki answered her concisely.

Mako's eyes went wide before her face turned to a bright smile, and then she faced Ryuko. "Really?"

"Really," Ryuko said, blushing at the sidewalk.

The brunette clasped her hands over her mouth, utterly ecstatic at the idea. Immediately, she knew this would be their best outing yet, and she just couldn't wait to get on with it. But before that could happen, her brain formed another question. "Wait, no offense Satsuki-sama, but if we're reliving *our* date, then why are you here?" Realizing she might've sounded rude, she amended, "Not that I don't want you here or anything! Satsuki-sama is totally great and all-"

"She's here because I asked her to come on our actual first date, too," Ryuko explained quietly.

"Why?" Mako asked simply.

"She was nervous," Satsuki told her without hesitation. "Didn't want to mess anything up."

"Satsuki-sama was your buffer?" She faced Ryuko again.

"Yes," Ryuko admitted. "It all worked out…"

"Right," Satsuki spoke. "So, where did you want to go first?" She, too, faced Ryuko.

"Uh…" She looked to Satsuki, and then to Mako. "How about food first?"

"Yes, that!" Mako agreed immediately.

"Sounds good to me."

Ryuko made sure to remove her key from the scooter's ignition, and then the three girls set out on foot. They headed in the direction of the very same crepe stand they went to the first time around. On the way, Ryuko told Mako about how Satsuki had surprised the both of them with her new haircut when they had first met up, to which Mako responded by playfully accusing Satsuki of trying to take the focus off their 'special moment'.

At the crepe stand, Mako ended up ordering the same crepe she ordered on that same day without any external influence. It was interesting for Ryuko to think about –either a coincidence or Mako ordered the same kind of crepe every time she got one, but that just didn't seem like her. She was positive Satsuki didn't even notice. She figured fate just liked to wink at her in little ways. From there, they walked off in the direction of the shops and stores.

"I remember this part," Satsuki spoke. "When we were walking in this direction, you two were walking behind me, whispering to each other thinking I couldn't hear. I did." She turned to face the both of them. "You were complimenting my appearance, and then we all stopped here to take what Mako called 'selfies'." She looked to Mako. "It was very important to her at the time."

“Oh yeah, I remember that! I was telling Mako about how well you had cleaned yourself up, and then she told me she’d brought a camera in her backpack.” Ryuko smiled. “That was fun.”

“I wish I had a camera with me now,” Mako said. “I don’t wanna forget this, either.”

“Oh my god, Mako!” Ryuko spoke excitedly. “I still have the pictures we took back at home. I can show you when we go back.”

The brunette’s expression went from mildly dejected to completely lit up. “I’m so glad! Good thinking, Ryuko-sama!” She said. Satsuki smiled kindheartedly, their joy contagious.

The unusual trio threw away their crepe wrappers before they reached the various department stores in the square. The sisters let Mako pick the first store, Satsuki picked the second, and then Ryuko picked the third, each store rather reflective of their respective personalities – Mako had chosen one of the frilliest stores, Satsuki had chosen one of the more mature, ‘adult lady’ stores (as Mako had so aptly described it), and Ryuko had chosen a more grungy store. In each shop, Mako made both Ryuko and Satsuki try on various outfits while also trying on a few herself.

“You guys gotta strut ‘em!” Mako insisted.

“Huh?” Ryuko vocalized blankly.

“You gotta show off the outfits! Like models!” She reiterated, and then changed her tone to one of determination. “I wanna feel what it feels like to be a bigshot fashion designer.”

While Ryuko was amused by her quirkiness, that’s also where she drew the line. “No way!” She laughed nervously. “I’d look too absurd.”

While they were debating it, Satsuki went ahead and said, “I’ll do it.” The other girls only stared, immediately silenced.

With no further cue, she then strutted across the changing room, her face still as stone just like a real model (and, incidentally, Satsuki herself). She was only wearing navy blue skinny jeans and a loose-fitting white tee, but somehow she made it look like the season’s freshest look. Ryuko and Mako both giggled at this, and also both admitted to her that she was very good at it. Mako went the extra mile and suggested she drop all of her projects at become a model ‘that instant’.

After this display of silliness, the three of them had loosened up considerably, genuinely enjoying each other’s company and the time they were spending together. Satsuki actually ended up buying a few outfits, and Ryuko bought Mako a dress she was really fixated on –it looked incredible on her, so it was hard for her to say no.

Walking out of their last store, the girls were all smiles. Mako then asked, “Where did we go next?”

Ryuko played like she was thinking about it, even though she remembered perfectly well. “After we went shopping, we all walked over to the park.” She looked up to Satsuki. “So I guess we’re going there next?”

“Sure,” She agreed.

They had only walked for a couple minutes, Mako practically skipping, until Satsuki put her arm in front of the both of them, stopping them in their tracks. The brunette looked up at her quizzically, and Ryuko spoke, “What’s the hold-up?”

“You know,” Satsuki answered. “What happened here? Remember?”

Ryuko remembered. She was hoping they could skip that part, but she knew deep down it wouldn’t be fair to Mako to keep from her what actually happened. Besides, now that she put a little more thought to it, her reaction might be pretty funny, just considering what she’s missed out on.

Mako had her head tilted at Ryuko, and then the taller girl conceded. “When we were walking along here, we were kind of um, stopped by someone.”

“Who?”

“Ah, Gamagoori stopped us,” She said, unsure how else to just come out with it. “He stopped us to ask you out.”

“Gamagoori-senpai?! The head of the Disciplinary Committee?” She shook her head quickly. “Him? Why’d he choose me? From everyone?”

Ryuko shrugged. “I guess I hadn’t been paying that much attention, but over the course of the whole conflict with the life fibers, I guess he developed a crush on you, having interacted with you and your family.”

“That’s crazy…” Mako muttered, blushing a little at the concept of someone with so much authoritative power liking her in that way. “He’s a three-star…”

“Yeah,” Ryuko said, her tone indecipherable. “It was awkward to say the least, considering his timing.”

She was about to elaborate more, before the brunette interrupted. “Did it make Ryuko-sama jealous?”

“No…”

“Yes,” Satsuki said the second the word escaped her sister’s mouth. While she was not the best at picking up on social cues, she felt it was very obvious that in the original situation, Ryuko was visibly ‘jealous’. The second the man had approached her, the dark-haired girl had already seemed to be quietly angry. While he was actually asking Mako out, she had crossed her arms and hid her eyes behind her bangs.

Ryuko wouldn’t meet either of their eyes.

“Ryuko,” Satsuki spoke again. “You did tell Mako that it was Gamagoori who saved her from the COVERS, correct?”

“Of course I did!”

“I don’t remember that,” Mako spoke, as though she were trying hard to remember. “Those big life-fiber monsters you mentioned? I remember being told I was eaten by one, but…”

“I may have forgotten to,” She said guiltily. “It’s not my fault! It’s hard for me to remember, considering I wasn’t there for it, you know, having been in a coma at the time.” Her tone had become disgruntled.

“It’s okay, Ryuko-sama,” Mako said, sensing the tension the topic had created. She placed a hand on her shoulder. “What did Mako say to Gamagoori-senpai when he asked her out?”

This, Ryuko remembered extremely well. “She said that she was sorry, but that she was actually on a date with me at the moment,” She told her carefully.

Mako instinctively looked over to Satsuki, as if to confirm. “This is true,” Satsuki validated. Then, she smiled as she remembered something else –“Actually, when you said that to him, I observed that Ryuko had started blushing considerably.”

The brunette giggled, and then looked over to Ryuko again. “She’s blushing now,” She spoke, looking fixedly up at her.

“No I’m not,” Ryuko insisted, looking away from her.

Mako smiled at her antics, and then boldly reached for her hand, intertwining their fingers. Ryuko glanced back at her, surprised, but she also didn’t hesitate to grip her hand. “Did he take it well?” Mako asked quietly.

“Yes,” Satsuki answered without hesitation. “Gamagoori is a very noble and honorable man. He was rather mortified at the prospect of interrupting what was going on between you two. He apologized profusely, despite Mako reassuring him it was fine.”

“That’s a relief!” Mako said. “I hate hurting people’s feelings…it makes me sad.” She breathed a sigh of respite, and then faced Satsuki again. “Are we going to the park now then, Satsuki-sama?”

“Yes, but, one more thing I feel would be interesting to share…” Satsuki said. She was starting to have fun helping Mako try to remember these things, putting her various memories to use. Plus, it was pretty amusing to embarrass Ryuko when she had the chance. “After that incident, Ryuko kindly excused the both of you, and pulled you to the side, out of sight.”

She watched as Ryuko’s eyes widened, but she continued. “You two were gone for about five minutes before I grew tired of being idle and decided to seek you out. When I found you-”

“Haha, that’s enough of that, Satsuki…” Ryuko interrupted nervously. “You don’t need to tell her-”

“No, tell me!” Mako insisted, looking up at Satsuki with determination. She grasped Ryuko’s hand tighter. “I wanna know.”

Satsuki looked to Ryuko, and Ryuko looked back at her with a distressed expression. “Ah, Ryuko asked me not to, so I won’t. Sorry, Mako.”

Mako looked up at Ryuko’s reddened face, again pleading with her wide, amber eyes. Part of Ryuko wanted to tell her, but she felt it was significantly embarrassing to explain out loud. “Since Satsuki brought it up, I guess I’ll tell you,” She allowed once more. “She was right. After Gamagoori asked you out like that, I was…a bit jealous. I took you aside to ask how you really feel, and when you told me, I…” She refused to make eye contact. “I kissed you…”

“You…kissed me? Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, I didn’t know Satsuki had seen it, but…”

The kiss Ryuko had given Mako in that alleyway, regardless of Ryuko’s embarrassment and current inability to explain it in detail, was one of the major turning points in their relationship. Everything Ryuko had felt for Mako to that point had been conveyed in that single gesture. The kiss that Mako gave Ryuko before she went to save the world was similar, except that one was more rushed, shaky even. This one had been from Ryuko, and it came from her heart; it started firm, possessive, resolute, and then melted into something more soft and emotional.

“That’s not embarrassing! That’s really nice…” Mako asserted, her heart feeling warmer. “Ryuko-sama kissed me…” She touched her fingertips to her own lips with her free hand, as if she could remember if she felt for it. Then, it happened again –the rapid, inexplicable snapshots of things Mako couldn’t decipher, too quick to distinguish. Her head spun again, and by the end of the spell, her brain had only collected a single impression.

“Was it over there?” The smaller girl spoke simply, pointing to one building in particular.

“I –yes,” Ryuko answered her. “How did you know that?” She asked, genuinely stunned. Even Satsuki’s eyes had widened.

“I don’t know,” Mako told her, rubbing her forehead with one hand. “Can we go to the park now? I want to sit somewhere.” Her tone became softer, more innocent.

“Of course,” Ryuko said. Though she was massively curious how she knew that, it was obvious that Mako was experiencing some considerable pain. She started walking in that direction with her, Satsuki following close behind.

They spent the remaining hours of daylight in the park, sitting on the benches for a while, and also walking the perimeter of the area. Mako asked them about the various battles they had together, except this time with perspective from both sides, not just Ryuko’s. With every new memory they made discussing old ones, Mako couldn’t wait to finally unearth those which had been inaccessible, more so now than ever.

Chapter 9: If Love is the Answer, You're Home

Chapter Notes

> Yeah, chapters 8 and 9 were named after song lyrics in Daft Punk's song Touch, which I was listening to a lot while writing the end of this chapter.
>
> I gotta say, even though this fic admittedly became a burden on my life once August hit, I really did enjoy writing it (while I was actually writing it) and I'm super glad I brought it into existence. Thank you all for reading, and I really hope you like the ending.

She told herself she wouldn't let herself get to this point, but Ryuko was discouraged. In every sense of the word, Ryuko had no idea what to do next. If the past three days hadn't done anything to recover Mako's memory, what would? There were those little flashes of memory Mako seemed to have, but what triggered those? They seemed to hurt her somehow, so Ryuko never asked.

The bottom line was that she had no plan for that day, no clue how to handle it at that point. Satsuki had given her the best possible solution, and it hadn't seemed to work. At least Mako seemed to enjoy her time, though.

As breakfast progressed, Sukuyo noticed the girl's silence. Both Ryuko and Mako ate slowly, not speaking a word, the air between them virtually unreadable. When Mako eventually finished her food and declared she was going to take a shower, Sukuyo thought it to be the perfect opportunity to pull Ryuko aside and have a chat with her.

"Ryuko hun," She started, sitting next to her. "I want you to chin up. It's not like you to be so dejected, not anymore. You can't give up. We're all trying our best here."

"I would never…" She muttered, and then looked up. "I would never give up. Giving up on Mako would be like giving up on myself. I couldn't."

"I'm glad to hear that," She replied. "Just think, what would Mako do if the situation were reversed?"

Ryuko smiled sadly. "She'd be working day and night. She'd stop at nothing."

"Don't you feel the same way?"

"Absolutely!" Her eyebrows drew together in determination. "I'm still giving it my all. I just…don't know what to do next. What can I do?" At this declaration, Ryuko felt a desperate tug in her heart, a pull like the one she had right after she had heard her diagnosis. She was willing to do *anything*.

“Well…” She sighed, placing a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you ask Mako what she wants to try next? See if she has any ideas, anything she wants to do?”

Ryuko smiled at the woman. “That sounds good. Maybe she should have a say for once,” She said, chuckling lightly.

“Right.” Sukuyo smiled back at her. “We’re all excited to see Mako back to herself again, so don’t forget, you’re not alone in your efforts, hun. We all believe in you, in both of you.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Mankanshoku. That was really helpful,” She said sincerely.

“No problem, dear.” She grinned. Then, she looked toward the table, and her smile became more nervous. “Now, would you mind helping me with these dishes?”

“Oh, not at all,” Ryuko responded politely.

As they cleaned the dishes with idle chatter, Ryuko kept her ears and eyes alert for Mako. Every now and then, the girl would get confused or jumbled trying to navigate her own household, and this came from the little changes that occurred between what she remembered and what she forgot. Between things like new appliances, new products, old and broken things they had tossed, Mako ended up misplacing things rather often.

Coming home, the younger teen had been confused by Ryuko’s stuff, even though Ryuko had told her explicitly that she had lived with her for some time. It was hard for her to distinguish the difference between the stuff that was Ryuko’s, and the stuff that had been her own, stuff she had acquired in that void of unaccounted time in her brain.

Even though their tastes were notably different, Mako had ended up using something of Ryuko’s over the past week without knowing. Ryuko considered saying something about it, but she truthfully didn’t mind. In fact, she thought it was kind of cute when the girl would come out of the bathroom smelling distinctly of her shampoo.

This being said, right about when they were finishing up the dishes, Ryuko heard Mako shout from the bathroom. “Ryuko-sama!” She called with her tone not desperate, but instead humored.

She set down the dish she was holding and then paced herself to the bathroom. “What is it?”

“Open the door,” Mako spoke from the other side.

Ryuko was hesitant. “…are you decent?”

“Yes!”

As the older teen began gradually pushing the door open, Mako continued, “Look at this,” She said, giggling. “Looky.”

When Ryuko had finally opened the door all the way, Mako was indeed behind it, in only her underwear and with her hair still damp. She wasn’t sure she’d consider it ‘decent’, but at least

she wasn't naked. Still, taken aback by her lack of clothing, Ryuko couldn't immediately pinpoint what the girl thought was so darned funny.

"This must be one of your bras, huh!" She said, grabbing her own boobs. Now that she mentioned it, Mako's breasts were spilling out of the top of the bra she was wearing. A closer look revealed that it was, indeed, Ryuko's bra. "Must've taken it by mistake!"

Ryuko continued to stare curiously for a moment before shaking her head and placing her palm to her face. "Mako."

It was funny to her, too, but she wasn't exactly sure how to react to the situation. Before she could even say anything else, Mako spoke again, "Here, you can have it back now." Then, she began reaching behind her back to undo the clasps.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Ryuko said, covering her eyes. "Here, you can just leave that one in there, and I'll go get you one of your own," She said hurriedly, closing the door. Mako shrugged, removed the bra, and then waited patiently for Ryuko to return.

Moments later, the older teen returned, opened the door just enough to push her arm through it, and then handed Mako one of her own bras. The brunette offered a tiny 'thanks', and then continued getting dressed.

After a few more seconds just standing outside the door, trying to think of what to say, Ryuko spoke. "Hey, Mako?"

"Oh, Ryuko-sama! I didn't know you were still out there," Mako responded. "What is it?"

She took a leisurely breath and then asked, "What would you like to do today?"

The brunette froze, only one leg through her shorts. "I get to choose?"

"Yeah," Ryuko said. "Wherever you want, I'll take you there. We could even stay in, if you want to."

"Hmm…" Came a muffled hum. "Alaska."

"I don't know about that," Ryuko said, her tone fake-serious. "How well can you swim?"

Bubbly giggles emanated from beyond the door. But then suddenly, Mako gasped. "*Can* I swim, Ryuko-sama?" She opened the door very abruptly, fully dressed. "What if I also forgot how to swim?!" Her face was but an inch from Ryuko's.

"Oh, I doubt it," She assured her. "That's more of a skill, like, muscle memory, not brain memory."

"If you say so…" Mako said as she squinted, her tone still suspicious.

"Seriously," Ryuko backed up just a smidge. "Where would you like to go today?"

The brunette tapped her index finger to her chin. “I’m not sure…that’s a lot of possibilities. Can I think about it for a little bit?”

“Sure,” She said. “Gives me time to clean myself up, too.”

Together, they still had enough money from Satsuki to do almost anything they wanted to, within reason. Giving Mako time to think about it was a good idea, that way they wouldn’t be wasting any of it. She was hoping some recess of the girl’s mind would come up with the perfect solution to their ongoing conundrum, but she knew it was no easy task, even for someone without significant memory loss.

By the time Ryuko had finished putting herself together, the rest of the Mankanshokus were up and meandering about. She found Mako waiting patiently for her in the family room, sitting next to her mother. “Have you made a decision?” She asked her casually.

“Yeah, actually,” Mako began. “Do you think that we could maybe…go to the park again, but this time without Satsuki-sama? I know we just went there yesterday, and I really had a lot of fun! But…I wanna try going again but this time, just with Ryuko-sama.” She stared down at her lap, her hands clasped together.

Sukuyo ruffled her daughter’s hair. “I think that’s a great idea. What do you think?” She said, looking toward Ryuko.

Ryuko smiled. “Sounds perfect.”

She really did like the sound of that. Though they had only been to the park once together in her gap of memory, it was a nice and calm place to simply spend some time with a person. Since they were both ready at that point, they headed out soon after the short conversation. Ryuko ushered Mako out the door, lingering for just a moment. Sukuyo softly gripped her arm, wishing her good luck on their way out.

It was another cloudless, hot day. Ryuko prepared her scooter once more, handing Mako her respective helmet. They then boarded, the brunette snaking her arms around her waist as she always did. Ryuko then asked her if she was ready, as she had done the last time.

The weather virtually mirrored the weather that was on that fateful day only a couple weeks ago. Truthfully, it made Ryuko slightly uncomfortable, but she wasn’t about to be wary at every sunny day that came her way. As they drove forward, Mako nuzzled her face into Ryuko’s shoulder blade, and Ryuko smiled. Some things would never change.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the park’s parking lot. Ryuko came to a complete stop and then took the key from the ignition, but Mako wasn’t budging; she still held onto her, squeezing her tighter even. “Mako,” She spoke over her shoulder. “We’re here.”

“I know,” She replied.

Ryuko took a full breath in and a full breath out, and Mako leisurely removed her arms from her torso. They stored their helmets in the scooter’s seat compartment, and then began walking toward the park’s concrete trail.

The environment seemed like something out of a dream. The sun's golden rays brought out the grass' vibrant green hue, as well as the amber in Mako's eyes. There weren't many people around, just as there hadn't been the previous day. As the days passed, there were fewer people: almost everyone was getting ready to leave town, or had already left.

As Ryuko was considering the logistics of the town's population and its rate of decline, she felt a small hand grab her own, and suddenly she was walking a lot faster. Mako held her hand tightly as she began running, her mind obviously feeling a tug in a certain direction. Ryuko didn't question her, rather she simply attempted not to trip over her own feet as she jogged behind the smaller girl.

They covered a few swaying hills before Mako came to an unexpected stop next to a rather large cherry blossom tree, its leaves green with the late summer. "This tree," She spoke firmly, despite how out of breath she was.

"What about it?" Ryuko asked, still recovering from almost knocking her over.

Mako looked up at her. "I wanna sit under it."

The taller girl shrugged. "Alright."

The brunette then plopped onto the ground in a very unceremonious manner. She then immediately went from sitting to laying, and Ryuko chuckled at how true to character her movements were. She, too, lay down in the grass right next to her.

They were silent a moment, just staring at the sky, before Ryuko spoke. "What made you want to come out here today?"

"I don't know," Mako answered honestly. "But it's nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah," She agreed. Where she didn't see how it would help her memory, it was very nice. She figured she could at least relax in the meantime. Besides, her main goal for Mako at the moment (besides recovery, of course), was her happiness. She took a big breath, sighing with the intent to unwind.

"Ryuko-sama?" Mako spoke. Ryuko turned her head to face her, and the brunette simply kept staring upwards.

"Hm?" She continued to look at the girl's profile.

"Can I ask you a question?" She asked, her tone the most serious Ryuko had ever heard it. The sound of birds carelessly chirping filled the gaps in their dialogue.

"Shoot," She told her, looking back up toward the expansive sky.

Mako was silent another few seconds, drumming her own fingertips on her stomach before she spoke again.

"Did you fall in love with me?"

Though Ryuko was rather caught-off guard by this question, she didn't show it. She didn't even move; not a muscle on her face even so much as twitched. Mako, however, had turned her head to face her at the break in response. She didn't expect her to reply right off the bat, but she did want to watch her as she gave her answer.

The breeze picked up and died back down before Ryuko swallowed, and then opened her mouth to speak. "Yeah."

Mako then adjusted herself in the grass, moving to lie on her side and face the other girl. "Would you tell me about it?"

The corners of Ryuko's mouth quirked upward in a small smile. "Yeah," She repeated.

She took a big breath before she began. "As you know, when I first met you, I wasn't sure *what* to think of you," She started. "You were bouncing-off-the-walls kinda hyper-" She glanced at her, "-you still are, and I wasn't sure I had a place in my life for that type of person. I was wrong, but in my defense I wasn't really thinking about friends at the time."

"I just…I didn't think I needed someone like you. At first, I was sorta wary that you'd get in my way, but you did the opposite. Though your presence *was* constant, it was never a bad thing. You quickly became my number one source of motivation, and later, more than that. You kept me on track, and you saved my life." She smiled at the memory.

Her heart became heavier as she continued. "For a while there, during my battles -especially the ones you interrupted- I couldn't decide how I felt about you…meaning like, did I just really appreciate you for the friend as well as the indestructible force that you were, or was it something more than that? I mean, Senketsu pointed out to me a few times how my heart rate would change when I looked at you or thought about you…" She sighed. "But, especially during those battles, I never really had the time or energy to put real thought towards it."

Finally, she made eye contact Mako. "I just accepted that I really liked being around you, and I left it at that for a while."

The brunette then scooted closer to her, sensing the story was about to get to the good part. Ryuko smiled. "I never went into this next part on purpose, and frankly, I'm surprised you never asked about it."

"Huh?" Mako tilted her head, utterly confused.

"How you asked me on that date."

"Oh!" The smaller girl said. "Yeah, I guess that slipped my mind! Wait, so it was *me?*"

"Mhm," She acknowledged. "Just listen –I was about to launch myself into space to defeat Ragyo just like I told you, except before that could happen, you interrupted me with another one of your speeches…except this time it was a little different -you asked me out. Literally, in front of the whole world," She recalled, her voice reflective. However, her tone then picked up a hint of grief. "You kissed me right there and then, and asked me to go on a date with you, you know, after I saved the world."

“And you said yes? To me?”

“Obviously,” Ryuko said. Then, she turned her head to face her again, except there was an emotion in her eyes that Mako hadn’t expected –sadness. However, in the same moment she looked at her, she looked away.

“Ryuko-sama?” Mako asked, clearly concerned.

“I just…” Ryuko started, her voice wavering noticeably. “I miss you, Mako. I really, really do.” She quit talking as her voice gave out on her, completely choked up.

The taller girl then sat up very abruptly. She took another look up at the sky before crossing her arms over her knees and then hiding her face in them. Mako didn’t say anything else. Instead, she also sat up in a manner similar to Ryuko, except she kept her head up, just staring at the other girl.

“I’m sorry,” Ryuko said with a muffled voice. “You wanted to have fun and I’m over here… like this. I’ll be fine in a moment, I promise.”

“You don’t have to be fine, Ryuko-sama,” Mako spoke softly. “In fact, please don’t pretend to be. It’s only natural for you to be upset…pretending you can deal with all this on your own is just not realistic.” Her tone then picked up a more certain, strong infliction. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not giving-”

The brunette was interrupted by a particular pair of lips covering her own. She completely froze up as Ryuko kissed her tenderly, her hand cupping her jaw and holding her there. The dark-haired girl’s eyebrows drew together with the intensity of the action, and a single tear rolled onto her cheek and transferred onto Mako’s face in the process.

Eventually, Ryuko pulled her lips from Mako’s slowly, but she didn’t remove her hand from the side of her face. Then, she spoke very softly, her breath rolling with her words, “I wish you remembered the first time I kissed you like that.”

Mako only blinked at her, her face blank, eyes wide. She swallowed desperately, inhaled quickly, and then spoke, “Ryuko…chan?”

Ryuko’s expression became very serious as she searched the other girl’s eyes. “What did you just call me?”

“Ryuko-chan?”

A smile stretched the practical width of Ryuko’s face as the momentous realization swept over her. She quickly became hysterical, blubbering incoherently about this and that, all of her words laced with the characteristics of the Mako she had tried so hard to restore before that moment. She held the brunette’s face still with both of her hands as she sprinkled it with kisses, her mantras eventually boiling down to ‘you’re back, you’re here, it’s you,’ repeated over and over.

Once she was able to regulate her breathing again, she looked her deep in the eye and spoke, “You remember.”

Mako nodded promptly, Ryuko’s cheek-aching smiling becoming extremely contagious. Before Ryuko could do or say anything else, the brunette kissed her on the mouth with just as much feeling as the older girl had given her. Maybe even more so, considering the force of her action caused Ryuko to fall backwards onto the ground, the smaller girl climbing on top of her.

Once they were both lying on the ground, lips apart from one another’s and smiles wide as ever, they took one look at each other before they both simultaneous broke into a fit of giggles. Neither one of them cared who saw as they rolled around in the grass, laughing with all the joy in the world.

Eventually, however, they both grew rather winded from the exertion. Somehow, Mako ended up back on top of Ryuko, pinning her there, neither of them as close to the tree as they once were. They both breathed heavily as the brunette gazed down at her and then spoke, “I love you, Ryuko-chan.”

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